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May 29, 1894.

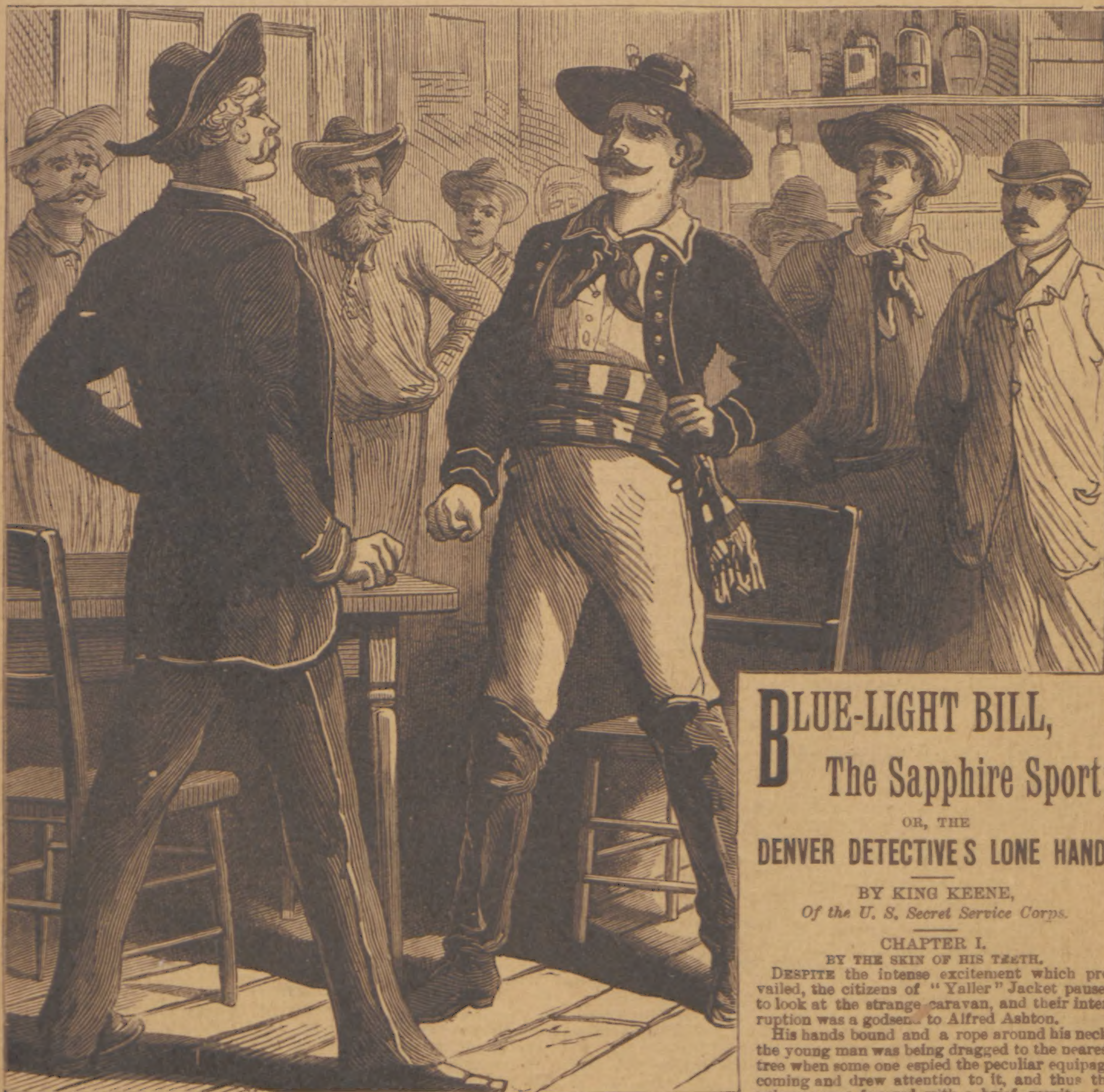
No. 879.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXIV.



BLUE-LIGHT BILL, The Sapphire Sport; OR, THE DENVER DETECTIVE'S LONE HAND.

BY KING KEENE,
Of the U. S. Secret Service Corps.

CHAPTER I.

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

DESPITE the intense excitement which prevailed, the citizens of "Yaller" Jacket paused to look at the strange caravan, and their interruption was a godsend to Alfred Ashton.

His hands bound and a rope around his neck, the young man was being dragged to the nearest tree when some one espied the peculiar equipage coming and drew attention to it, and thus the prisoner was favored with a brief respite: for what the crowd beheld was certainly something to awaken curiosity.

"I'M GOIN' TO SQUARE 'COUNTS WITH YOU BEFORE YOU LEAVE THIS CAMP,
AND DON'T YOU FORGIT IT."

Drawn by six plumed horses, gayly caparisoned, it looked not unlike a street car, only that it was larger, nor yet unlike Noah's ark, but it was smaller than that. It appeared something of a cross between the two, at first sight; a house-like affair, gay in gilt and paint, with a door in the visible end, and what appeared to be a skylight in the top.

"What in snakes an' Sadducees aire et, anyhow?" demanded Dan Barker, the worthy mayor of the camp.

"Et's ther car of Juggernaut, b'mighty!" exclaimed Tom Connor, proprietor of the Horse Hotel, the only hostelry the camp could boast.

"Git out, you!" cried Billy McNulty. "Why don't ye call et a hearse and be done with et. Et's a circus, that's what et aire, as anybody kin see with half an eye."

"We don't keer a tin whistle what et is," urged Jabe McDavit; "we hev got biz on hand, and et can't be put off. Ther man what killed poor Kennedy Cook has got 'ter swing, and I'm one what says so!"

"Don't you work yourself into a cast-iron sweat, Jabe," rebuffed the hotel proprietor, turning upon this speaker. "Et won't take us long ter wait awhile, and I fer one, am goin' ter know what this thing is. Ef et had more wheels I'd swear et was the Juggernaut, fer a fact."

Tom Connor, by the way, was a friend to the prisoner. He had been doing all in his power to stop the lynchers, and was determined to gain a respite if possible, hoping that something would turn up in Ashton's favor; for, knowing him as he did, he could not believe him guilty of the crime of which he stood accused, and for which his life was threatened.

"You don't seem ter keer whether ther crime is avenged or not," McDavit retorted. "Et's plain enough that Alf Ashton done et, fer didn't he quarrel wi' Kennedy Cook only yisterday? What more proof do ye want 'n that? An' ef he killed him, ain't et good enough proof that he killed Hilderbrant, too? I say string him up, an' let et be a lesson an' a warnin' to any other galoot what feels inclined ter go crooked in ther same direction!"

There was a faint cheer from the crowd, but it was only a faint one, for all attention was now centered upon the approaching house on wheels.

"Keep yer shirt on, Jabe!" the mayor came to the support of Connor, though not with the same purpose in delaying the lynching. "Ther prisoner can't git away, and a few minutes more or less fer him to suck air won't make any difference to anybody, I guess. I want ter know what this thing is, too."

The car was now coming nearer, down the gulch, and a couple of outriders in livery appeared to have it in charge.

Yaller Jacket had never seen anything like it before.

Presently, when it had come nearer still, a turn in the trail brought the car sidewise to the crowd, and a discovery was made.

There were painted words upon the side of the strange caravan, which, as soon as read, made the whole matter plain. The words were these:

"MILLE NANA DUBUFE, PHOTOGRAPHS."

"Photograms, b'mighty!" cried Connor, with pretended excitement. "That gal has run plumb ag'in' a fortune; whether she knows et or not."

"What d'ye mean?" asked the mayor, puzzled.

"Mean? Why, of all ther lynchin's that ever took place in ther hull West, I never heerd of one that was photographed, and this is jest her chance, b'mighty! What a pictur' et will make, too; we kin hang et up an' p'int to et wi' pride in ther days to come."

"We don't want nothin' of ther kind," growled McDavit. "What we want is ter do jestice hyer, and ther way to do et is ter hang this prisoner jest as high as we kin yank him. What say, boys?"

There were some shouts of approval.

"Hold on!" ordered the mayor. "Don't be too fast about et. That idee of a pictur' ain't bad, an' I think we'll git one took, if the shop is open for business when et stops. Hillo! thar's the woman, now. My! but ain't she a looker, pard?"

There was a small platform on the front end of the car, and while the mayor was speaking a door opened and a woman came out. She was a splendid-looking bit of femininity, richly and jauntily dressed.

She saluted with a wave of the hand.

The outriders had now urged the six horses into a faster gait than a walk, and in a minute or so the car was brought rolling and rumbling into one street of the camp.

When it came to the place where the crowd was, the woman gave the signal to stop.

"Gentlemen," she made inquiry, pleasantly, "may I ask the name of this place?"

"Sartain ye kin, miss," answered the mayor, promptly. "This hyer aire ther camp of Yaller Jacket, and I'm ther mayor of et."

"This is the place I was told about, then, as being on the trail. But, tell me, what means all this demonstration? I see you have a prisoner—Mercies! you are not going to hang him!"

"That is jest what we aire goin' ter do, though," put in Jabe McDavit. "Ef you don't want ter see ther sight you had better git back into yer house thar, fer he is goin' up right now. Come on, boys, an' let's venge poor Cook!"

"Hold!" ordered the mayor, firmly. "Jabe McDavit, don't you begin bein' mayor of this hyer camp till I stop. He'll swing when I git ready, but not before, and don't ye forget et. Lady, thar is a request we want ter ask of you, so be as ye don't mind et."

"A request? Of me?"

"And thar's money in et, too," chipped in McNulty.

"Ther fact is," the mayor hastened to in form, "we want a pictur' of this hyer thing took."

"A picture? Is it not horrible enough, to think of taking the life of a fellow-creature, without desiring a picture to keep the deed forever in mind?"

"But, he's a murderer, lady; a 'fernal murderer!" cried McDavit.

"Is this true, Mr. Mayor?" asked the woman.

"Et must be true," the mayor declared.

"Whom did he kill?"

"Kennedy Cook, one of our best citizens."

"Indeed? When was it done? Who witnessed the crime?"

"Et was done last night some time; ther poor cuss was found stiff an' cold this mornin'. As ter witnesses, nobody seen et done, but ther general verdick aire that et must 'a been Ashton."

"Why is he suspected?"

"Cause we know him an' Cook didn't love each other none too well, an' they had a quarrel only yesterday."

"And is that the only evidence against your prisoner, gentlemen?"

"Ain't et enough?" demanded McDavit. "What more do ye want? Ef this man didn't do et, who did?"

"And you would hang this man upon such proof?"

"I opine we will."

"What does the prisoner say?"

"I am innocent of the crime," spoke up Ashton. "There is not the slightest proof against me."

"Gentlemen, don't you think you had better go slow?" the woman asked, looking into the faces of those around. "Hadt

you better investigate further before you proceed to measures so harsh?"

"What did I say?" cried Tom Connor. "This ain't no case o' hoss-stealin', that we need ter be in sech a rush about et. For my part, lady, I don't believe Alf Ashton done et at all, and I'm in favor of givin' him a chance ter prove himself innocent."

"That is all I ask," said the prisoner.

"Wull, ye ask more'n ye will git," shouted McDavit. "Fetch him along, boys, an' we'll hang him first an' talk afterwards."

Some were willing, but most of the crowd now hung back. Three minutes earlier, almost every man of them had been eager for the hanging; but now it looked as though McDavit would soon have not a single supporter.

"Don't be in sech a red-hot hurry about et!" shouted the mayor. "I'm 'clined ter think mebbly this lady aire right, and that we hev been crowdin' things too much. Et won't cost nothin' ter give Alf a show, anyhow."

"I don't believe in doin' things that way," roared McDavit, hotly. "This camp is bad in need of a little purifyin', an' we may as well begin right hyer as anywheres else. Ken Cook was my friend, and I'm goin' ter see that he's 'venged!'"

"And Alf Ashton is my friend," now declared Tom Connor, sharply, having plenty of backing. "We have come to our senses, Jabe, and this hangin' is declared off fer ther present."

McDavit saw it was useless to hold out longer, so he threw down the rope and walked a few paces away.

"Have et yer own way," he stopped to growl. "Let him git off, an' then when ye find I was right ye will wish ye had him. This is the second death at his door, an' mebbly he'll add another notch or two ef ye give him the chance."

"You're a liar, Jabe McDavit!" cried the prisoner, his keen eyes flashing. "Were I free I would cram your words down your throat."

"Liar, am I? Kin you prove that ye didn't kill Thomas Eilderbrant? Kin ye prove ye didn't murder Ken Cook?"

"I defy you, sir, and everybody else, to prove that I did kill either. You do not even know that Mr. Hilderbrant was murdered; everything goes to show that he died of fright."

"That's a likely story, with the safe robbed as et was!"

"Well, I cannot say; all I know is that I am innocent in both matters, and all I want is a fair trial, to which every man is entitled."

"It seems there has been some dark work going on here, gentlemen," now spoke up Mlle. Dubufe. "Of all things, I detest crime, and I sincerely hope you will be able to clear up these mysteries."

"You are right," responded the prisoner, who was as cool as the coolest man in the crowd. "There has been dark work, and no one is more eager than I to have it shown up. I want to thank you for your interference in my behalf. Had it not been for your coming just when you did, I would now be a dead man."

At that moment a new-comer appeared upon the scene. Nobody had noticed his approach, and the first that was known of his presence was when he cheerfully hailed.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW-COMER.—THE HAUNTED MAN.

"HILLO! What's the matter here, citizens?"

Such was the new-comer's cheery challenge, in a deep, musical tone, and every head turned to learn who had spoken.

The crowd beheld a man sitting gracefully in a comfortable saddle astride a proud-looking coal-black horse, a man not more than

thirty years of age at most, judging by his looks.

He was neatly clad in an easy-fitting suit of superior material, and his wide-brimmed hat became him well. He had on a negligee shirt of fine quality, with loose, broad collar and heavy silk tie, and upon the latter, where it was knotted, sparkled an immense sapphire.

Good-looking, with keen, black eyes, he was a man to command attention anywhere. He sported a graceful mustache, and his dark hair rested upon his shoulders in the good old Western style. His left hand rested gracefully against his thigh, while with his right he lightly held the rein. A smile was upon his lips as he ran his eyes over the crowd.

"Hillo to yerself, stranger!" the mayor promptly responded. "Why, we kem almost to havin' a hangin'-bee hyer, and I guess mebbey we would, too, only fer the timely rival of this lady."

He waved his hand toward Mlle. Nana.

The sport—he was a sport, in the broad and liberal Western sense of the term—doffed his hat promptly.

"Score another point for the fair sex," he said. "We should all soon be little better than barbarians but for your restraining influence, lady. The world without you were a howling wilderness."

A tinge of color heightened the glow of the young woman's cheeks, and she inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"Don't you belong to this hyer outfit, then?" inquired Tom Connor, in great surprise.

"Does my greeting indicate that I do?" the sport rejoined. "By the looks of things, I take it the outfit has just arrived from up-gulch way: I came in from the other direction."

"Then I'm fooled, too," declared the mayor. "I took you ter be boss of ther concern, at first blush. Might we ask what your handle is, ef that ain't comin' at ye too personal? Must have somethin' to call ye by, ye know, and names is cheap as dirt, these days."

The sport laughed.

"You couldn't very well come at me any more personal, as you call it, sir," he observed. "However, names are cheap, as you say, and you are welcome to mine for what it is worth. It didn't cost me anything, and you may have it at the same figure. I'm called Blue-light Bill, the Sapphire Sport."

"Snakes an' Sadducees!" the mayor ejaculated.

"That's a dandy name, b'mighty!" exclaimed Tom Connor, excitedly.

"It answers the purpose very well," the sport quietly observed. "But, about the hanging—what has your prisoner been doing?"

"Why, a murder was done hyer last night, and et was thought he done et. One of our best cits was laid out stiff an' cold—Kennedy Cook, the superintendent of ther Speckled Hen."

"Did I not understand you to say two murders had been committed?" asked Mlle. Nana.

"Wull, we can't jest swear whether t'other one was a murder or not, lady. Et was Thomas Hilderbrant, owner of ther Speckled Hen Mine. He was found dead one mornin' some weeks ago, but as thar was no marks on ther body et was thought he'd been skart to death."

"Scared to death?" repeated the Sapphire Sport.

"That was what I said."

"Would you mind explaining? It strikes me as something quite out of the ordinary, your thinking the man was frightened to death."

"Yes, and Thomas Hilderbrant was a man

quite out of the ordinary, too, he was. He was known hyerabouts as the Haunted Man; et was ther common belief that thar was a ghost hot on his trail."

"This grows interesting, decidedly," Blue-light Bill remarked. "Then you are of the opinion the ghost cornered him at last, are you?"

"He was cornered, fer a fact, fer he was sittin' on ther floor in a corner when he was found, his eyes wide open, and his face distorted, and had ther worst skart look I ever see in my life. Ye see, Sport, he was a man who wouldn't be alone in ther dark a minute, an' when he was discovered in ther manner said, ther light was out. Now, jest put two an' two together an' ye have ther sum. He waked up in ther night, found ther light was out, and ther ghost gathered him in afore he could help himself."

"That's all very well in talk," struck in Jabe McDavit, "but how about ther robbed safe?"

"Ha! was there a safe robbed at the same time?"

"Sure thar was."

"Then that does change the appearance of the matter considerably," the sport commented. "Robbery was probably the motive, and the man may have been killed in some way that could not easily be detected. Do you think your prisoner guilty of that crime as well as this, Mr. Mayor?"

"Et's hard ter say. His name was mentioned, but nobody would have rested him hadn't et been fer this other deed. He had a quarrel wi' old man Hilderbrant only a day or two before, and only yesterday he had a quarrel wi' Cook. You see et looked shakky fer him."

"Jest what I claim," supplemented McDavit. "I say he'd orter swing; don't you say so too, Mister Sport?"

"If he's guilty, certainly; but I believe in going slow in such matters."

"Just what I have been urging, sir," spoke up Mlle. Nana. "I believe that the mayor has decided to give the prisoner a chance."

"Good for the mayor, then!"

"Yas, we'll lock him up," the mayor announced, "an' then do our pootiest ter unravel ther snarl."

"And I've a notion to stop over and see it out," the Sapphire Sport declared. "It strikes me you have a hard nut to crack, and I shouldn't mind taking a hand in the game myself."

"Are you a detective, sir?" asked the prisoner.

"Well, I've done work in that line, my friend."

"Then if you can stop over I beg you will do so, and try to get me out of the fix I am in. I'm as innocent as you are."

"That certainly has the honest ring about it, mayor," and the sport turped to Barker. "I think you must have the wrong man, and as my time is my own and I've got all there is of it, I'll stay."

"Good fer you, b'mighty!" shouted Tom Connor. "I'm sure Alf is innocent, an' I want to see him proved so. You come right along to my hotel, Blue-light Bill, an' et shan't cost you a cent while you ar' workin' up ther case. Ef Alf ain't proved clear I'll eat my hat!"

The crowd gave a cheer, and for the time being Alfred Ashton's life was safe. He was led away under guard.

Blue-light Bill rode on to the Horse Hotel, while the mayor directed Mlle. Nana where she might locate her car, and gradually the crowd dispersed.

"So you think Ashton innocent, do you?" the sport questioned the hotel proprietor, to draw him into conversation, after they had entered the house.

"I know he is," Connor stoutly declared. "I know him well, an' there ain't a whiter man in this hull camp'n what he is. Et

looked bad fer him, I allow, an' et would 'a' gone hard wi' him ef et hadn't been fer that woman's comin'."

"Your mayor said the prisoner and the dead man had quarreled. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes, somethin'. They both loved ther same gal, ye see."

"Ha! And he had quarreled with the other party, too, it seems. Was he another lover?"

"Bless ye, no; that one was ther daddy of ther gal."

"Well, go ahead and give me the particulars, so I can get my grip onto the situation."

"Easy done. Thomas Hilderbrant was owner of ther Speckled Hen, and he had a darter named Veronica. Ther gal was stuck on Alf, an' him on her; but Ken loved her, too, an' the old man favored him most and was bound ther gal should marry him. That was what the first racket was about, the old man ferbiddin' Alf ter speak to her."

"It gets complicated, the further it is probed. And what about the Haunted Man—anything in that, or only a great bugaboo?"

"There was somethin' in et, you bet! It's been the mystery of this hyer camp ever sence he kem hyer."

"And he never explained it?"

"Never. His own fambly didn't know ther secret."

"That is strange, truly. How much of a family had he?"

"Only ther darter I mentioned, and a son named Lyster. His wife died when these was young."

"And both are now grown up?"

"Yes; Lyster is a feller about twenty-four, and Veronica is only a year or so younger I take et—in fact, I've been told so."

"And these knew, of course, about their father's trouble—that is, that he had a horror of the dark?"

"Couldn't help knowin' et. That's their cottage, down the gulch thar," pointing from the open door. "From dusk to sunrise you'd never miss seein' ther brightest kind of a light in that corner room on the second floor."

"Did anybody notice its absence on the night of his death?"

"I noticed et myself."

"What time was that?"

"About two o'clock. A feller was sick hyer, and I was up 'tendin' to him, an' I seen that Hilderbrant's light was missin' from ther windy."

"What did you think about it?"

"I thought—'Old man, yer light is out fer oncet, anyhow.'"

"And you were the only one who noticed it, so far as you know?"

"Fur as I know. I told about et, next mornin' when I heard the old man was dead. Et only served ter show that he was prob'ly dead at that hour."

"What was taken from the safe?"

"Some money, and papers that was of more 'count 'n the money."

"Did you notice any one particularly flush after that time, any one you could suspect?"

"Not a one. Close watch was kept, but nary a clue has been found from that day ter this. Et's a deep mystery, Sport, an' you will do well ef ye kin unwind et. I hope ye will, fer Alf Ashton's sake."

Their further conversation brought out nothing of much interest.

CHAPTER III.

THE SITUATION.—SOME HIGH WORDS.

This camp of "Yaller Jacket" was a live place.

It had one very rich mine, the "Speckled Hen," and some others which were well worth the working.

The Speckled Hen had been owned by one man solely—Thomas Hilderbrant, and was now held by his son and daughter, the son having stepped into his father's place as manager.

Kennedy Cook, the man found murdered on the morning of which the opening of our story treats, had been superintendent of the mine and the accepted lover of the mine-owner's daughter, though it was generally known that Veronica's preference was Alfred Ashton.

The young woman had accepted Kennedy Cook to please her father, but after her father's death Cook began to notice that he was not so certain of his prize as he had been before. He once or twice found Veronica in Ashton's company, and this was what had led to the quarrel of which mention has been made, and finally, as some now thought, to Cook's death.

Early on this morning of which we write, the superintendent of the Speckled Hen was found dead in front of the Brace-up Saloon. This was the leading saloon and gaming-place of the camp, and had been open till a late hour.

Cook had been present until within an hour of the closing, playing.

That was the last seen of him alive.

Earlier in the evening Ashton had been in the saloon, but he had said little to anybody, and presently had gone quietly out again.

It was known that he and Cook were not friends, and there were some who expected they would come to a fight, after a quarrel they had had that day, but nothing of the kind took place.

When the crime was discovered, the first man thought of as the probable murderer, was Ashton. Some witnesses said they had seen him looking at Cook rather darkly on the previous night, and upon the strength of it all his arrest quickly followed and the charge was formally made.

Cook had been a general favorite in the camp, and the denizens being greatly excited over the discovery of the crime, it had not taken a great deal to work them up to a desperate pitch; and as the prisoner could not, or would not, give a satisfactory account of himself, it was proposed to lynch him. And lynched he certainly would have been, but for the timely arrival of Mlle. Nana and the sport.

The hour was still early, and nothing of the excitement was known at the cottage occupied by the Hilderbrants till it was all over.

This cottage was some distance from the center of the camp, with its "every-day" rooms on the side toward the mine, and it was not until they were at breakfast that the brother and sister learned of what had taken place.

"Have you heard the mine whistle this morning?" Veronica asked.

"No, I haven't," Lyster responded. "If you have not heard it either, it can't have blown. Something must be wrong."

"What can it be?"

"Nothing serious, I hope. I'll go up and see as soon as I swallow this coffee."

Just then the servant entered, her face pale, and said hurriedly:

"Oh! Mr. Hilderbrant! Something terrible has happened. Here is a man to see you, sir, and he says Mr. Cook has been murdered, and that—"

"Good heavens!"

The same exclamation escaped the brother and sister together, as they sprung to their feet, both pale to the lips.

"Where is the man?" Lyster asked. "Show him right in here. Don't give way, Veronica; there may be some mistake about it. Maybe it's not so bad as reported. I'll see immediately."

The young woman had laid hold upon the back of a chair for support, for the horror of the thing had unnerved her.

Lyster had no time to leave the room, however, for at his first word the servant had sprung to bring the man in, and as the young master of the mine turned to go the man entered.

"What is it, Ben?" Lyster demanded.

The news-bearer was a rough miner, roughly clad, who was turning his hat in his hands nervously.

"Ther super has been killed—found murdered," he informed, "an' Alf Ashton has come near to bein' lynched fer ther crime. Thar's been a dash of a time up at ther camp."

"My God!" cried Veronica, wildly. "Do they accuse Alfred Ashton of the deed? He is innocent! oh! I know he is innocent! I must run up to the camp at once and tell them he is innocent. They must not hang him—"

"Wait!" interrupted Lyster. "Let's hear all Ben has to tell. When was Cook killed, Ben? Why do they accuse Alf?"

"He was found dead this mornin', an' him an' Alf quarreled yisterday."

"But, he is innocent, I know he is innocent, Lyster!"

"I'll go up at once and see about it. Do you stay here—"

"No, I'll not stay a moment; I must go and prove him innocent—which you cannot do."

She made haste to get ready, while Lyster asked further questions of the man who had brought the news, and in a few minutes the trio set forth for the camp center in all haste.

The mayor had just joined Connor and the Sapphire Sport at the Horse Hotel when they were seen coming up from the cottage, and the sport asked who they were.

He was informed, and appeared to be interested in them.

"They hev jest heard about et, I opine," the mayor remarked. "I'm glad now we was stopped from yankin' ther prisoner, fer I wouldn't keer to face that gal ef we had done et."

"No, nor me," agreed the hotel proprietor. "She was more stuck on Alf'n she was on Ken, that's certain."

The trio soon came up, when Lyster called out:

"Is Mayor Barker in there?"

"That's what he aire," the mayor himself responded, and he made haste to get out and show himself.

The Sapphire Sport and Connor followed him.

"Oh! Mr. Barker!" the young woman exclaimed, "you must not allow them to hang Alfred Ashton for this crime, for I know he is innocent, I do know he is innocent!"

"He ain't goin' to be hanged right away, miss," the mayor assured. "We ar' goin' to give him a chance fer his life. But, what do you know about et? How do you know he is innocent?"

"I know it because he was with me, at our house, until a very late hour."

Lyster looked quickly at his sister, surprised.

"That don't clear him," spoke up Jabe McDavit, who was one of a group on the piazza. "Ken was in ther Brace-up till a late hour, too."

"Yes, but Alfred did not kill him, I know he did not kill him," the girl excitedly persisted. "I know him too well; he could not do a deed like that. You will set him free, won't you, Mr. Barker?"

"He'll have ter stand trial, miss," the mayor answered.

"But you won't lynch him, will you? You won't allow them to hang him unless he is proven guilty?"

"I kin promise ye that, Miss Hilderbrant. He shall have a fair an' square chance ter clear himself, an' I hope he'll be able ter do et, too."

"He will, I know he will, sir!"

"Where is the body?" asked Lyster.

"In ther Brace-up. They ar' makin' et ready fer buryin'."

"I'll go and see it. Veronica, you had better go back to the house, since you can do no good here."

"No, not until I have seen Alfred Ashton. You will allow me to see him, will you not, Mr. Barker?"

"Sartain you kin see him, Miss Hilderbrant."

"I object to et," struck in McDavit. "Et will give 'em a chance ter hatch up a story, an' be ther means of gettin' Ashton off whe-ther he is the right man or not."

"Sir!" and the girl turned full upon him.

"Do you think I would lie to save him, if I thought him guilty?"

"Love will do a good many things," McDavit sneered.

"It seems to me, sir," spoke up Blue-light Bill, "that you are determined to put this thing on the prisoner if you can. What's your object in it?"

"Ken Cook was my friend, that's my object," the man promptly answered. "I'm goin' ter see to et that he's venged, an' if Alf Ashton done et he has got ter suffer fer et."

"I never heard Mr. Cook speak very endearingly of you," observed the young woman.

"That ain't got nothin' ter do with et. He was my friend all ther same, an' I'm goin' ter do what's right by him. Ther man what killed him has got ter swing, ef I have ter hunt him down and hang him alone myself."

"Miss, do you feel positively certain the prisoner is innocent?"

It was the Sapphire Sport who asked the question, and he lifted his hat as he spoke.

"I am sure he is, sir," was the earnest answer.

"Then allow me to suggest that you do not go near him, so that nothing of the kind you have just heard hinted can be charged against you and him."

"And who are you, sir?"

"Nobody in particular, perhaps; but I have taken interest in this affair and I'm going to do what I can toward bringing the crime home where it belongs. I will go and see the prisoner."

"And what's ther difference?" demanded McDavit.

"I'll tell you what's the difference, sir," and the sport turned upon him with flashing eyes, speaking in a voice full of grim significance. "You can't accuse me of being partial in the matter, for I will put the crime where it belongs, no matter where. This prisoner is nothing to me."

"You hev said, though, that you believe him innocent."

"So I do, with as good a right to that opinion as you to yours that he must be guilty."

"Well, go ahead, but I am bound that justice shall be done, no matter who et falls on. Ef I can't git it one way I'll git et another."

"If justice is what you are after, sir, it would be a good idea for you and me to work together on the case. That is all I am seeking, and it is all the prisoner has asked for."

"Yer ain't my style," McDavit rejoined, with a shrug of the shoulders. "This ain't no matter fer no dood ter meddle with, anyhow."

And with that he walked away, the sport looking after him with flashing eyes one moment, his lips parting with a smile of disregard the next.

CHAPTER IV.

MCDAVIT TAKES WATER.

Just at that time two women appeared upon the scene.

One, coming from the direction of the photograph car, was Mlle. Nana, while the

other, coming out from the hotel upon the piazza, needs to be introduced.

She was a pretty woman, but had an unpleasant flash in her rather too-large eyes, and was one to be set down at sight as a sport. Her attire was semi-masculine in style.

Her hat was of the broad brim variety, turned up on the left side and held in place with a gold star. And, instead of buttons, her coat and vest were adorned with these same stars of gold, smaller in size; the one on her hat being quite large. Her suit was of blue serge.

The eyes of these two met for an instant, as Mlle. Nana approached, and then she of the gold stars looked around at the group.

For a moment she appeared to study the face of the Sapphire Sport, then turned to the mayor.

"What is the excitement this morning, Mayor Barker?" she asked.

"Snakes an' Sadducees, don't yer know, Gold Star?" the mayor exclaimed in surprise.

"I do not, sir. You know I was up late last night, and I have slept late in consequence. I can see, though, that something out of the usual has been going on while I enjoyed my beauty sleep."

As she said this she smiled jocosely.

"Wull, somethin' mighty serious has taken place," the mayor informed. "Yer pard at cards last night has been murdered—"

"Heavens! You do not mean Mr. Cook?"

"Nobody else, Gold Star. He was found dead in front of ther Brace-up, about daylight."

"This is horrible. Have you found the murderer?"

"We thought we had, but et don't look so now. We 'rested Alf Ashton fer et, but thar ain't no good proof that he done et."

The woman's face was pale; the news had evidently been a shock to her.

"This must be cleared up, citizens of Yaller Jacket," she spoke, earnestly. "You will give your prisoner a fair chance, of course, but if he is guilty he must suffer for his crime."

"He is not guilty," Veronica Hilderbrant urged again.

"Can you prove it?" the Gold Star asked.

"I will try to prove it, if it comes to that. I hope his word in the matter will be taken."

"It is your duty to clear him, if you can."

"You need not remind me what my duty is. He is to have a fair trial; we will see whether he can be proven guilty."

Their eyes met, and for a moment neither spoke.

Mlle. Nana had now come upon the piazza, and the Gold Star looked again at her.

Blue-light Bill was watchful and attentive, and now he addressed this woman.

"Do I understand, lady, that you were playing cards with this man last evening?" he politely asked.

"If you so understand you are right, sir; but who are you?"

The answer was short and the question to the point.

"I am one who has undertaken to solve this mystery," the Sapphire Sport rejoined; and he further introduced himself. "It may be that something was said during the time you were playing that will throw light upon this matter."

The woman looked thoughtful.

"Do you recall anything?" the sport asked.

"What I do recall, sir, would not be favorable to the prisoner were I to mention it."

"No matter, out with et, Gold Star!" cried McDavit, who had turned back again after going a short distance away. "All we ar' after hyer is ther truth, an' that we ar' bound to have."

"Yes, we want nothing short of that," the sport agreed.

"Well, I will tell you what was said, then. We were playing, when Mr. Cook saw Mr. Ashton come in, and he remarked: 'There is a fellow who had rather see me dead than alive, but I am on the lookout for him.'"

"What did I tell ye?" cried McDavit.

"Do you take that as proof against Ashton?" the Sapphire Sport asked.

"Sartain I do; what else do ye call et? Et's plain he laid in wait fer him ter come out, when he fixed him."

"You forget what Miss Hilderbrant has said, I guess, don't you? Besides, let me inform you, if you don't know it, that talk with dead men can't be taken as evidence in court."

"Mebby ther gal lies, though, seein' she loves—"

That was as far as he got, however. A couple of long strides, after leaping to the ground, brought Blue-light Bill to where he stood, and grabbing a handful of coat and shirt at the back of the fellow's neck, the sport lifted him clear from the ground with his right arm alone and shook him.

"You dare to call a lady a liar?" he demanded. "Take it back, or I'll shake you right out of your clothes! This may be no matter for a dude to meddle with, as you told me a moment ago, but I never allow a galoot like you to insult a woman in my hearing. Take it back, or I'll give you what you deserve, and that, in a hurry, too, I warn you!"

He had allowed the feet of the dazed McDavit to touch the ground again, and all around, especially the ladies, were looking upon him with wonder and admiration.

"L—I didn't say she does lie," McDavit gasped; "I said mebbly she might, seein' that she loves ther feller."

"That is just what you have got to take back."

"Wull, then, I take et back."

"Beg the pardon of the lady, too."

"Miss, I beg yer parding," the cowed fellow promptly complied.

"And now get out of my sight," cried the sport, giving him a fling. "You give me that tired feeling even to look at you."

"Yas, I'll go," McDavit growled, as soon as he could recover his balance, "but this hyer thing ain't settled 'tween you an' me yet, an' don't you ferget et. My turn next time."

"See that you don't get worse," the sport warned.

McDavit walked off, and did not stop until he had disappeared within the Brace-up Saloon.

"Sport, give me yer hand," cried Mayor Barker, grasping it as he spoke and giving it the heartiest kind of a shaking. "That ar tickled me clear down inter my boots, et did."

"Did it?" smiling.

"Et did, yer know. That's somethin' I have been waitin' ter see fer this many a day, an' now I've seen et. Jabe McDavit has been wantin' some one ter take him down, an' he's got what he wanted at last. Sport, thar's only one fault I've got ter find with you."

"What's that?"

"Yer name. Ye had orter been called Blue-lightnin' Bill."

The crowd gave its approval, and the sport was looked upon with something almost akin to awe.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," he said, smiling, "since the dude is in it he may as well take hold in earnest. Miss Hilderbrant, will you suffer me to make a suggestion?"

"Assuredly, sir."

"It is this: Return home, and I will visit the prisoner in your stead. Later on I will call on you and your brother at your cottage."

"I gladly acquiesce, sir. I know you will do all you can for Mr. Ashton, and I am sure you are to be trusted. Are you going back with me, Lyster?"

"No; I must see the body of poor Cook, and have all proper arrangements made. But, you return, for there is nothing you can do, and you are better off there."

So, Miss Hilderbrant set forth upon her return to the cottage, while her brother and the Sapphire Sport crossed over to the Brace-up.

The Gold Star looked after the sport with admiring gaze.

"What a remarkable man!" she exclaimed.

"He exhibited wonderful strength, at any rate," remarked Mlle. Nana.

The other turned her gaze immediately upon her.

"Who are you?" she asked, civilly.

"I am owner of the photographic car you see over there; my name is Mlle. Nana Dubufe."

"Indeed? Did you arrive during the night?"

"I could have come in last night as well as not, had I known I was camping so near, but I arrived only a little while ago."

"Do you know who that gentleman is?"

"I hear him called the Sapphire Sport, that is all."

"Then he is nothing to you?"

"I should naturally know more about him, if he were. Do you think I can get lodging here?"

"Jest one room left, lady," the proprietor struck in. "I kin book ye fer et, ef ye say so."

"You may do so, for I want a change from sleeping in my car."

She followed Connor into the house, the Gold Star watching her until she had disappeared, when she shook her head, muttering:

"I don't think I'm mistaken, I don't think I am."

"What is your opinion about this matter, Mr. Hilderbrant?" the Sapphire Sport had meantime asked.

"Have scarcely been able to frame an opinion, sir," was the reply. "It does not seem credible that Ashton can be guilty of the crime."

"Who and what is this man Ashton?"

"He is superintendent of another mine here, same as Cook was superintendent of the Speckled Hen."

"I have been told something about the rivalry between him and Cook for your sister's hand. That is hardly a reason for the crime, since Ashton must have known he was preferred."

"So I think, now. It is safe to say he did not do the deed at all."

"Then the great question before us is—"

"Who did?"

"Yes, and it is for us to find out. You must not let on, Mr. Hilderbrant, but I am the man you and your sister sent for secretly to come here and solve the mystery of your father's death. I am Don Danton, from Denver."

The young man started, looked in the face of his companion, and their hands met in a firm clasp.

CHAPTER V.

THE SAPPHIRE SPORT MAKES A SEARCH.

DON DANTON had been sent for, as we have now learned from his own lips, to solve the mystery, if possible, of the death of Thomas Hilderbrant.

Enough of that matter has been mentioned to give the reader some understanding of the case. It was an open question whether the man had been killed by the robber, in some manner, or had been scared to death.

Known as the Haunted Man, his life at Yaller Jacket had been a mystery. What

has been related concerning his horror of the dark was all true. Never would he remain in the dark a moment, if he could help it. He had been caught that way a few times, and on every occasion his cry for light was pitiable.

Once, for instance, he was in the sitting-room of the cottage with his son and daughter and some others, when a sudden gust of wind blew out the light. He shouted for light immediately, but it was some moments before the windows could be shut and light procured, and by the time it was made he was fairly screaming with fright, and his face was found to be beaded with perspiration.

He would never tell why he was so afraid, or whether he saw anything; the secret was locked in his own breast.

It was with good reason he was called the Haunted Man.

One morning some weeks prior to the time of our story he was found dead in his room, the light out; and his face was horribly distorted, bearing in death an expression of greatest fear.

At first it was thought he had been frightened to death. His light had gone out, probably, and he awaking and finding himself in the dark, had died of very horror before light could be produced. When, however, the safe in the room was found open, and its contents gone, that opened a new vista for suspicion.

This safe was a private one, which had always been kept in Mr. Hilderbrant's private room, both since his coming to Yaller Jacket to live and before.

There was another and larger safe at the office of the mine, but he had never kept private money and papers in that.

So stood the case; and, as said, Don Danton had been sent for to solve the enigma.

The brother and sister had said nothing to any one concerning their intention in the matter, and so it was that "Delicate Don" had taken upon himself such a unique disguise.

Having made himself known to Lyster Hilderbrant, he enjoined upon him the necessity of keeping his identity a secret, and there was no time for any further talk then, for it was but a short distance from the hotel to the saloon and they were quickly there.

The Sapphire Sport entered boldly, and quickly took in the whole scene.

Jabe McDavit was there, and a scowl appeared upon his face the moment he saw who had entered, but Don paid no attention to him.

At the far end of the room, on one of the long tables, lay the body of the murdered man, with a crowd of curious citizens standing around talking about the matter in whispers.

Some men were preparing the body for burial.

Delicate Don advanced at once to the table, and picking out the personage who seemed to be in charge of the work, addressed him.

"May I see the fatal wound on this body, sir?" he asked.

"Who are you?" and he was looked at keenly.

"Mr. Hilderbrant has engaged me to try to solve the mystery of this murder," the detective answered.

Lyster acknowledged this by a nod. "Certainly you may, sir," was the immediate permission. "You see it was a knife-thrust, directly behind the left shoulder-blade and straight to the heart."

"Yes, and by a small blade, which must have been of considerable length. It was driven home with force, as the appearance of the wound proves. Who in this camp has such a knife as this must have been?"

"Yer won't have ter look fur ter find out," muttered McDavit, just loud enough to be heard.

Et was shown that Ashton had sech a

knife," the mayor explained, he too having come over. "He claims he lost et some time ago, however."

"And a mighty good time ter claim et, too—or a mighty poor time, jest as ye happen ter look at et," McDavit chipped in again. "But, I ain't in et now; go ahead an' sift et out."

The Sapphire Sport looked troubled over this bit of news.

"Is there a doctor in the camp?" he asked. "I'm one," answered the man to whom he had been talking.

"Good enough. Have you examined this wound carefully, to learn what direction the knife took?"

"The cut tends slightly upward, sir."

"Upward, eh? I will make note of that!"

"I fail to see anything in that fact, sir. What difference whether the blow was upward or downward?"

"The difference between a short person and a tall one, it may be."

"An' Alf Ashton ain't short, that's a sure thing," the mayor remarked. "But, which way does et signify, Blue-light Bill?"

"We'll talk about that in private," Don answered, not caring to say anything further openly. He had drooped a hint for the guile to one to feed upon in reflection. And he added: "It was not a case of robbery, I understand?"

"No, not that; not a thing was tetched, so far as known."

"Where did the victim lodge?"

"At ther Horse Hotel."

"Has his room been searched, for a clue?"

"No; et ain't; nothin' likely to be found thar, I should say."

"I don't know about that. We'll go and investigate, anyhow. I am in earnest in what I have undertaken."

Lyster Hilderbrant stopped to give some particular directions concerning the body and its burial, and when he had done, a dozen or so set forth to make the proposed investigation.

They met Connor, who was crossing to the saloon, and when they made known the business in hand he gladly turned with them to open the room.

The room was one of the best in the house, though none, in such a hotel, were to be classed as elegant.

Connor had his keys, but the door was not locked.

The bed had not been slept in, and there was nothing to indicate that Cook had been in the room before he met his fate. Everything was in order, just as the servant had left it the previous forenoon.

Some clothes and boots were in sight, and in one corner was a trunk.

Blue-light Bill, to use names at random, in speaking of the Denver detective, took in everything at a glance.

"Go through the pockets of those clothes," he directed the landlord. "Maybe something in the way of writing will be brought to light that will give us a clue."

This was done, but it revealed nothing important, and attention was then given to the trunk.

One man of the party, the justice of the camp, by the way, had brought the dead man's keys, so there was no need to break the trunk open.

The moment the lid was raised, Lyster Hilderbrant sprung forward, exclaiming excitedly:

"Some of my father's stolen papers!"

On top of everything else lay a bundle of papers tied with a leathern thong, a bundle once seen likely to be remembered.

"Hold on!" ordered the Sapphire Sport, and he put out his arm to detain the young man from taking them up. "How do you know they are your father's?"

Lyster flashed a look of almost anger at the man, though knowing him as none other could.

"I have seen the bundle hundreds of times, when father's safe has been open," he answered. "I know I cannot be mistaken."

"All right; I only wanted it made plain to all present. Now take up the papers and let's see if you are right."

Lyster took them up.

"You see I made no mistake," he called attention. "Here is father's name, in his own hand, on the back."

"Snakes an' Sadducees!" exclaimed the mayor. "What do et mean, anyhow?"

"What I want ter know, b'mighty!" cried Tom Connor.

"It is not easy to say what it means," observed the sport. "It might be taken as proof that Cook, himself, was the robber."

"That does not seem possible," demurred Lyster. "Why, my father and he were friends, and father reposed a good deal of trust in him, I am sure."

"Another point I will remember. Very trifling of itself, but it may work in to fill a niche somewhere. Take charge of the papers, Mr. Hilderbrant, and take good care not to lose them."

"You may be sure I will do that. These are some of the papers for which we have been anxiously searching, and they may explain something of the mystery of father's death, or at any rate the mystery of his life. I will examine them at my leisure later on."

He put the papers carefully away, in a pocket, as he spoke.

"Now, Mayor Barker, and you, Mr. Justice, do you give me full permission to search the trunk?" and the Sapphire Sport turned to the men he addressed.

"Sartain," answered the mayor. "We mean ter give you full charge of this matter, to sift et to ther bottom. Ain't I right, Mr. Dowbey? Ain't I right, Mr. Hilderbrant?"

This man Dowbey was the justice of whom mention has been made, and both he and Lyster agreed with the mayor.

So, Don undertook the examination of the trunk, in the presence of all.

It did not contain much worthy of mention, some clothes, linen, etc., and some letters and papers.

To these the detective gave attention, tossing some of them back into the trunk after a single glance, while others he carefully retained.

The mayor and the others looked on curiously.

When Don had done, he had several of these letters and papers in hand, and turning to the mayor, said:

"I am satisfied that this man Cook was not a man of much honor, mayor; I am also satisfied in my own mind that Mr. Ashton did not kill him."

"Tell us about et," the mayor urged.

"What hev you found, Sapphire?"

"You'll excuse me, mayor, but I think it is for the best interest of the case not to make these things public at present. I will work quietly until I get all the points, and then I'll make everything known. I'll retain these letters and papers for the present, by your leave."

Though disappointed, the mayor assented to this, and there the search ended.

CHAPTER VI.

DELICATE DON INTERVIEWS MCDAVIT.

On the following morning the funeral of the murdered man took place, and it was largely attended.

Everything had been done with care to make the funeral as excellent and as impressive as possible, and as one fellow remarked:

"It was no slouch of a plantin', you bet!"

Nearly the whole camp attended the obsequies, and if there was a chief mourner it was Jabe McDavit. When the body had been lowered to its last resting place he, in a loud voice, registered a vow of vengeance

over the grave, somewhat to the disgust of many.

After the body had been committed to the ground, the crowd speedily scattered, many of the rough denizens of the camp breaking for the saloons to drink a final farewell to the departed.

McDavit went to the Brace-up, which caught most of the others, and there the Sapphire Sport found him later on.

"May I have a little talk with you, my man?" Don asked, touching him on the arm.

The fellow slightly paled when he saw who it was.

"What do yer want ter talk to me fer?" he roughly demanded. "I don't want nothin' ter do wi' you."

"I heard the oath you took at the grave."

"Wull, what of et? Got anything ter say about et?"

McDavit's bosom rankled with the recollection of the rough handling he had received the day before at the hands of this sport.

"It shows that you are in earnest about wanting to avenge the murder, that is all," Don made rejoinder. "You know I am on the hunt for him as tall as a horse, and together we may be able to bring him down."

"Then ye want me ter work wi' you?"

"I want to learn all you can tell me."

"Well, I kin tell ye this fer one thing, that Ashton is ther man."

"I am more than ever convinced that he is not the man. He is as innocent of the murder as I am."

"Wull, ef he is I'd like ter know who done et, that's all."

"Which is just what I desire to find out, and I think you can help me. Now, will you answer some questions?"

"I don't know whether I will or not. Ther fact of ther business is, I don't like you, an' I'm goin' to square 'counts wi' ye fore ye leave this hyer camp, an' don't ye fergit et."

"If you insist upon that, I'll step out and accommodate you now, sir."

"No, fer you an' best man an' I won't stand no show. We'll square up ther 'count all ther same, though."

"Then it is your intention to take me un-awares?"

"I ain't said so, hev I?"

"Don't let me catch you at it, if it is, that's all."

"Et wouldn't be likely ye would, ef I meant ter take ye foul."

"Then do you refuse to talk with me about this matter? If Cook was your friend, as you claim, and if your oath meant business, I should think you would be glad to aid me."

"Wull, what do ye want ter know?"

"How long have you known him?"

"I knowed him fer sev'ral years, when he first kem West."

"Where did he come from?"

"Never asked him."

"But you know all the same, don't you?"

"What has that got ter do with et? You ain't no detective, no more'n I be."

"Maybe not. He was from Maine, was he not? And his true name was Robeyson, eh? Was a married man, and had one child, a son, I believe."

McDavit was staring at the sport in blank amaze.

"How ther doose did yer know et?" he demanded.

"Much obliged to you for so much, anyhow," observed the sport, smiling. "You may as well tell me all you can, now."

"But, how did yer know et?" the fellow still insisted.

"By playing the detective a little, in a quiet way. Do you know whether his wife is living or dead?"

"I don't believe he never had none. You ain't as smart as ye thought ye was. You

ar' talkin' through yer hat, that's what ails ye."

"Maybe so. You are the fellow who did a little job for him not a long time ago, I believe. Now the best thing you can do is to come to terms with me and give me all the points."

The fellow had paled slightly.

"What do ye want ter know?" he asked for the second time.

"Did you kill Thomas Hilderbrant?"

"No, I didn't!" the answer like a flash. "Ef ye think I know anything 'bout that, you ar' away off."

"Well, was he dead when you entered the room to rob the safe? Or did he die after you went away? You see, I know who the robber was, so there is no use your trying to get out of that."

"Yer don't know nothin' 'bout et. Kin ye prove what ye say?"

"Do you want me to try?"

"I don't keer what ye do. Ye can't bluff me fer a cent, you can't. Ef ye know anything, out with et; ef ye don't, shet up!"

"Well, then, I won't try to bluff you. But, now to business: You are in earnest about desiring to avenge the death of Cook?"

"You kin jest bet I am."

"And I am in earnest about wanting to get the right man, and I'm sure Ashton isn't the one. So, there is one point on which we can work together. Do you know of any one who would want to kill Cook?"

"Nobody but Ashton."

"How about the wife he deserted in Maine?"

"See hyer, do you s'pose Ken Cook would 'a' been goin' ter marry Veronica Hilderbrant, ef he had a wife livin'?"

"I have heard of such things before."

"Wull, he wouldn't, an' you kin set et down fer a fact. But, what's ther use our talkin'? I know who killed him, an' ef you want ter beat around in ther wind fer nothin', go ahead."

"Can you prove what you assert?"

"Et stands proved a'ready, an' et would 'a' been a good thing ef Alf Ashton had been hanged."

"One thing more, and I'll leave you: Did your friend have any other rival for the hand of Miss Hilderbrant?"

"Not a one."

"That's all, then. You hold to your theory and I'll stick to mine, and we'll see which will come out ahead. Hello! looking for me, Mr. Hilderbrant?"

"Yes; Connor thought he saw you come here."

"I'm with you."

It was Lyster Hilderbrant, who had entered in search of the detective from Denver.

Don rose and left McDavit, and passed from the room with Lyster.

"I'm late," Lyster said, "but I had some business with a man who called just as I reached the house. We're ready to have you come over now."

"And I'm ready to go," Don answered.

"I was trying to get something out of that man McDavit, but he is as close as a clam. I believe he's the man who robbed your father's safe."

"Ha! those papers!"

The young man clapped his hand to his pocket, and his face paled immediately.

"You haven't lost them?" Don asked.

"I have, as sure as you are born. I never thought of them last night, being busy paying the hands, and your remark reminded me of them."

"Maybe they are at the house, somewhere where you have put them."

"No, I did not think of them once after I put them in my pocket yesterday. I have lost them, that is certain."

"This is bad. I hoped by them to be able to clear up the mystery of your father's life."

"We'll look in the house, but I think it will be useless."

The young man felt in all his pockets, though he knew well which one he had put the packet in, but the papers were not to be found.

On arriving at the house he asked Veronica if she had seen them, but she had not, and search proved that they had not been lost there. The papers were simply gone.

"I don't understand it," Lyster said musingly. "I certainly did not take them out of my pocket, and I don't see how they could get out without help. Do you imagine I can have been robbed?"

"You are best judge of that."

"Well, I don't see how or when it could have happened. Pshaw! This throws us back again."

"You are right; but, it can't be helped. Well, let's begin the investigation here, and I'll see what I can make of the mystery. You may tell your sister who I am, Mr. Hilderbrant."

Don was thereupon properly introduced, much to the young woman's surprise.

This investigation at the house had been purposely deferred until after the funeral of the murdered man.

Don was conducted to the room in which Mr. Hilderbrant had been found dead, and there the whole matter was gone over again in every detail.

The apartment had been used as a sleeping-room, a private library on a small scale, and a something of an office as well. Here Mr. Hilderbrant had taken persons who had strictly private business with him. The safe was under a heavy table which stood in a corner between two windows.

One of these windows opened toward the camp proper, the other looked out upon the rugged hills across the gulch.

Here, as was explained, on this table, a light had burned from dusk to dawn, every night.

On the morning of the robbery one of these windows was discovered slightly open, and it was supposed—in fact, it seemed plain—that the robber had entered by that way.

The corner opposite was the one in which the dead man had been found crouching, facing the table. Nothing in the room had been found out of order, further than has been mentioned. Just how deep this mystery was, who could say?

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE HAUNTED MAN.

DANTON, signifying that his investigation in the room was ended, the trio repaired to the sitting-room below.

"Now, how much can you tell me regarding the mystery of your father's hidden life?" the Denver detective asked, when all had taken seats.

"Very little, indeed," Veronica made answer. "We understood it to be a forbidden subject, and never questioned him about it. Whatever it was, it was more than he could bear."

"You believe he was really haunted?"

"We can explain it in no other way," said Lyster.

"You never asked him about it? That seems rather doubtful."

"Well, yes, I did ask him once, when a boy, and never but that once. The appearance of his face frightened me, and he sternly commanded me never to mention it to him again."

"Did you understand that this secret was to die with him?"

"No, when we had become grown, sister and I, he told us on one occasion, that upon his death we should find papers in his safe which would explain whatever had been a puzzle to us in his lifetime. It was spoken of only the once, and that but very briefly."

"And these are the papers you have now lost?"

"I suppose so. Nothing worse could have happened. We would have given twice

the sum of money that was taken from the safe, rather than lose these papers."

"And Lyster tells me they were found in Mr. Cook's trunk," observed Veronica.

"Yes, so they were."

"Do you think he was the robber, then?"

"It points that way, but I can't be sure of it. I have another theory."

"What is that?" Lyster asked.

"That your father may have intrusted these papers to Cook for some reason or other. What do you think about that?"

"He trusted him a great deal," said Veronica.

"Have you any idea why?"

"I have not, sir."

"He desired you to marry him, I am told."

"He was forcing me to do so, sir, though against my will, as he knew."

"There is something in that I cannot understand. It seems plain your father did not know all about Mr. Cook, while it may be the latter knew some secret of your father's and so had an advantage over him."

"Do you know anything against him?"

"I am satisfied he was not free to marry, for he had a wife living at the time he was seeking to wed you."

"Heavens! The wretch! But, I am not greatly surprised, for I believed him capable of almost any villainy. Papa certainly did not know this, Mr. Danton."

"It is hardly to be supposed he did, if he loved his child."

"Loved us! Why, Mr. Danton, he could never sufficiently express his love for Lyster and me. Could he, Lyster? Why, more than once he has held us to his heart and wept aloud over us."

"Strange, strange," Don thoughtfully muttered.

"What is strange?"

"This secret of your father's haunted life. You have no suspicion what it was?"

"No."

"Tell me everything you can about him."

"There is little to tell. He came of a rather large family, was poor in his early days, but worked and saved and came into something of a fortune later in life. He married our mother at the age of thirty, and she died about a year after my birth. As far back as Lyster and I can remember he had this great trouble on his mind, and he seldom smiled."

"That is little enough, truly. Can you add anything to it, Mr. Hilderbrant? Remember, no secrets are to be held back, if you expect me to be of any use to you in solving the mystery."

"I can tell nothing more than you have heard from my sister, sir."

Don questioned on perseveringly, but the gain was nil. It was evident the brother and sister had told all they knew about their father's life, and that they knew but little.

Finally Don took leave, returning to the camp.

There he sought out the mayor, finding him, with a group of others, at the car of Mlle. Nana, getting his picture taken.

The mayor espied him as he approached. "Hi! Hold on, gal!" he quickly called out. "This hyer group ain't complete 'thout ther Sapphire Sport in et. Come right hyer, Sport, an' take yer place with ther good-lookers of Yaller Jacket."

"Thank you," Don answered, "but I guess I had better not. You are all citizens there, I see, and I'd be an odd sheep and would spoil the flock. Go right on, and you and I will stand together another time. I want to talk with you as soon as you get through there."

"Wal, all right, then, ef that's ther way you look at et."

The lady photographer had had her hands full all the morning, and was driving a good business in her line.

Photography at Yaller Jacket was some-

thing decidedly new and novel, and everybody was eager to embrace the opportunity of having his shadow corralled—as some one put it.

Mlle. Nana got her group in order once more and secured a picture, after which she dismissed them and the mayor joined the Sapphire Sport.

"What d'ye want, pard?" he asked.

"Have ye found out somethin'?"

"Very little, so far. I want to visit Ashton now, and wanted you to come along with me."

"Which I'll do, glad enough."

They went off together, talking about the case, and ere long were at the door of the calaboose in which Alfred Ashton was imprisoned.

There was a guard around the rude jail, as well to keep intruders out as to keep the prisoner within. The mayor, however, had the right to go and come at will.

On entering, they found the prisoner in good spirits.

"Glad ter find ye lookin' peart," the mayor greeted him.

"May as well keep a stiff upper lip, I suppose," Ashton answered. "It won't better my condition any to mope."

"We have come to have a quiet talk with you," said the Sapphire Sport. "We want to get all the points you can give us, and may be able to make something out of it."

"Do you believe me innocent?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm willing to talk with you. Go ahead with your questions."

"Where were you the night of the murder, after you left the Brace-up Saloon? This is important to know."

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Another person is concerned."

"Well, we know; you were with Miss Hilderbrant. Now, what time did you take your leave of her?"

"I know you are not guessing at this, and she must have told you I was there. But, that will not clear me, for I left there about midnight, before the Brace-up was closed."

"Then you are right; that cannot help your case any. Have you any suspicion who killed Cook?"

"Not the slightest, sir."

"It is claimed that you had a small dagger that would about fit the wound in his back."

"I had such a dagger, but I lost it some time ago."

"That is bad, again. Well, another question: How is it Jabe McDavit is so bitter against you?"

"I suppose he is honest about it, and wants to avenge his friend. I can't believe he would want to hang me if he believed me innocent."

"You and he are not friends?"

"Neither are we really foes, that I am aware of."

"Do you know of any foe Cook had, or any rival besides yourself?"

"I do not."

"Then it is a mystery who killed him, and there is every reason for the camp to believe you are the man who did the deed."

"Yes, no doubt."

"And you can do nothing to clear yourself?"

"Not confined here as I am, certainly. I must rest my case with my friends."

"You speak as if you think you might do something were you free. Now if you have such a thought, just let me have your plan."

"There is one man I should like to have here to work for me in the matter."

"And who is that man?"

"Don Danton, of Denver. I have heard a great deal about him, and I believe he could bring this thing out all right."

"Mayor, we'll send for him," the sport proposed. "If Mr. Ashton thinks Don Dan-

ton could clear him, he is the man who ought to be here."

Don had an object in playing thus.

He did not want it suspected that he was the Denver detective, in disguise.

"We will send," the mayor agreed. "But, do ye think et's any use till you have had a fair hack at et yerself? They can't hang ther prisoner till they prove him guilty, that's flat."

"Let the prisoner decide for himself."

"You have done detective work before, sport?"

"Yes; I am not quite a novice at it, Mr. Ashton."

"Well, then, go ahead and do what you can. But, I don't see how you are going to clear me, with nothing to work upon."

"Something may turn up. Now, do you know anything about that robbery at the Hilderbrant cottage? Have you any suspicion who it was robbed the safe? I will not say—and who murdered Mr. Hilderbrant, for I do not think he was murdered."

"I know not, sir. Why do you ask me this?"

"Some of the missing papers were found in Kennedy Cook's trunk."

"Can it be possible! I would not want to accuse him of having stolen them, but—"

"But you think he was equal to the occasion, eh? I understand you. It certainly rests between him and Jabe McDavit, I think. I'm gathering up the fragments, and maybe I'll be able to patch out a whole piece after awhile."

CHAPTER VIII.

MCDAVIT TRIES IT AGAIN.

THEIR interview with the prisoner at an end, the Sapphire Sport and the mayor repaired to the Horse Hotel, talking about the case on the way.

Arriving there, they were met by the proprietor, Tom Connor, on the piazza, and it needed but a glance to learn he had something to say to one or the other, or perhaps to both of them.

"What is it, Connor?" asked Don.

"I've got a idee I want ter lay afore ye," the response.

"All right; go ahead."

"Et's a tecklish one; do ye want ther mayor to hear?"

"Yes, if it's anything to do with the murder mystery we are trying to unravel, my mar."

"Wull, et jest is; somethin' I have thought of. Come in an' take chairs, an' I'll onwind et to ye, though I hate ter do et, too."

They followed him in, and were soon seated.

"You say you hate to make it known?" queried the Sapphire Sport.

"That's what I do, fer it may be that I'll wrong ther party, but et has took fast holt onto my mind."

"Well, out with it; we can at any rate look into it."

"Have you heard of Roxana Murray?"

"Snakes an' Sadducees!" exclaimed the mayor. "I never oncet thought of that, Tom."

The Sapphire Sport looked from one to the other, questioningly.

"No, I haven't heard of Roxana Murray," he made answer to Connor's inquiry; "what about her?"

Before more could be said a great shouting was heard without, and Don Danton sprang up and hastened to the piazza, closely followed by the others.

From the direction of one of the low liquor-dens of the camp Jabe McDavit was seen approaching with a mob at his back, all wildly vociferating.

Don Danton took in the situation at a glance: it meant danger for Alfred Ashton.

"We ar' in fer et," the mayor spoke hur-

riedly. "I'm 'fraid et's all up with Alf Ashton now."

"We'll see about that," responded Don, grimly. "A live man is worth a dozen dead ones, any time, and our prisoner is alive yet and we will try to keep him so."

"But, McDavit means business this time, sure."

"So he did before, and so do we. I have a scheme, if we can only work it quickly."

"What is et?"

"We must get the prisoner out of there before Jabe and his mob go to the jail. Can you go and remove him, while I hold McDavit here?"

"But, kin ye hold him?"

"I think so; he is gathering his forces now, you see, and his crowd isn't big enough yet. I'll argue the matter with him as long as I can, and when he makes a break for the jail finally he will find it empty."

"All right; I'll try it, apyhow. There's a sort o' cellar under a shanty not far from ther jail, an' I'll try to git him in thar an' leave a man with him. Ef I'm seen, though, et will be all up wi' him, an' maybe me too. I'll go quietly by the back way."

The mayor turned and entered the hotel, and as soon as out of sight ran quickly out by a rear door and was off upon his mission.

On came the howling mob, with McDavit in the van.

"We mean biz this hyer time!" the ringleader yelled. "Whar's the mayor? We demand that 'ar jail opened on ther double quick. We hev got all ther proof that's needed, now, an' Alf Ashton has got ter swing!"

And his followers whooped their approval.

McDavit was waving a blood-stained glove in one hand and a slender dagger in the other as he came.

Rushing up the hotel steps to the piazza, he there sprung up on the railing to make himself the more conspicuous and began to harangue the crowd.

"We have got ther proof whar et belongs at last, feller-citerzens," he bawled. "Kennedy Cook must be 'venged, an' Alf Ashton must swing. Hyer's ther lost dagger, an' hyer's one of Ashton's gloves, all smeared wi' blood; I found 'em wrapped together in a crack in ther Mink Mine."

And so he ran on to great length, saying nothing, practically.

The Sapphire Sport allowed him to rattle away, knowing it was all a gain of time for the mayor.

"An' so I say hang him—hang him!" McDavit at last wound up. "This hyer camp ain't goin' ter bear ther strain of murder un-avenged ef we know et, I reckon. Come on, an' we'll wash out ther 'famous stain!"

There was by this time a howling mob almost as large as that which had first come so near hanging the prisoner.

They whooped themselves hoarse, and were ready to follow McDavit's lead.

Delicate Don now took a hand.

As McDavit leaped down from the railing he sprung up, and his deep, full voice commanded the attention of the crowd, even to McDavit himself.

"I don't want to spoil your fun, boys," Don said, "but there is one thing I want to call your attention to: You are not going to break your word with Ashton, are you?"

"That ber darned!" McDavit bellowed.

"We ar' goin' ter hang him!"

"That's all right; but I thought the men of Yaller Jacket were men of their word. You have promised this prisoner a fair trial, and he has the right to expect it. You are not going back on your word, I hope. If you have found further proof of his guilt, that is bad for him; but in the name of common justice give him a show for his life."

The loud mouthings of the mad mob grew

less loud, and a few men fell out of their places looking abashed.

"What is this hyer your business?" demanded McDavit, savagely. "You ain't a citerzen of this hyer camp, anyhow. You 'tend ter your business and we'll 'tend to ours. Ours is ter hang this red-handed murderer jest as soon as we kin do et, and clear ther good name of our camp. Come on, boys! Come on, come on! We don't keef fer any sport what wants ter cheat us out of our 'venge. Ken Cook's blood is callin' to us from ther ground. Come on!"

And so, yelling loudly to drown the further words of the Sapphire Sport, he started for the jail, motioning the mob to follow.

Although a few had dropped out, the crowd was still a large one, and composed of the very worst element in the camp, at that. If the prisoner was found, it might go hard with him.

With a run they left the hotel, and as they started some one clutched the Sapphire Sport by the arm.

Don looked quickly and found it was Billy McNulty.

"I'm on your side, Sport," the fellow said hurriedly. "I believe Ashton is innocent, now, an' I'm ready ter fight fer him."

"You are the kind of men that are wanted just now," Don made hasty response. And then he called aloud:

"How many are ready to fight for the prisoner?"

"Hyer's me, fer one," promptly responded Tom Connor.

"Yas, an' hyer's me, too," from another man; and in a few seconds a score or more stood ready to back the Sapphire Sport.

"Then follow me, every man of you," Don cried, leading the way, with McNulty at his side. And they ran around toward the jail in another direction from that which the mob had taken.

"Have you found out anything?" asked Don of Billy, as they ran.

"Yes, I have," the answer. "I have a s'picion that Jabe McDavit himself is ther man what killed Cook."

"That suspicion is not new to me, my man. Keep it mum."

There was no time for further talk, for now they came out in sight of the jail, where the mob had just arrived.

There were the guardsmen, and the door was closed and the heavy lock and chain were in place on the outside. No one could doubt but the prisoner was safely within.

"Open that 'ar door," roared McDavit, as the mob came up. "We ar' goin' to hang that cuss this time, an' don't ye doubt et. He's the one what killed Cook, an' we have got ther solid proof of et now, sure pop. Open up, or et will be the wuss fer ye, I warn ye!"

"We can't do et," answered the chief of the guard. "Don't you try to get in, either."

"Don't be fools; can't ye see we mean it?"

"So do we."

"But, et will be death ter you, fer we ar' bound ter hang that feller ef it has ter cost bleed ter git at him."

"Where is the mayor? Why didn't ye bring him? Ef he says open, we'll open; but we can't do et else. We hev been put hyer to guard this prisoner, an' we mean ter do et."

Don felt sure the jail was empty. The words of the guardsman proved it; he had been instructed what to say, no doubt.

"Shall we rush up an' open fire on 'em?" asked Billy McNulty.

"No, for a score or more would be killed needlessly," answered Don. "The prisoner isn't there."

"But, they'll kill ther guards."

"No they won't; they will give up in time to save their skins."

"Ef ye don't git out of our way, boys," McDavit was at the same time saying, "ye had jest might as well speak fer yer coffings,

fer we ar' goin' ter have that man ef we have ter walk over yer carcasses to git him. Come now, git out of our road!"

The mob pressed close, and the guardsmen gave way before them.

"Keep back," the captain still warned. "Ye will make us shoot ef ye don't, an' we don't want ter do that."

"Shoot an' ber darn to ye, ef ye want to! Ye will only git riddled yerselves ef ye don't look out. Now, boys, with a rush an' we have got ther jail! Hooray!"

The crowd made a rush as directed, the guardsmen were swept away, and the jail was in the hands of the angry horde of irresponsible and unreasoning ruffians. It would have meant death to the prisoner had he been found.

The key was demanded of the captain of the guard, at the point of the revolver, and he gave it up.

A rope had been brought, and everything was at white heat for the hanging.

Great disappointment awaited them!

Still whooping and haranguing, Jabe McDavit inserted the key in the lock and unlocked it, loosened the chain and flung open the door, rushing in with a score of his followers at his heels.

And such a yell as went up then!

"Whar is he?" the ringleader roared. "Whar is that red-handed murderer? We ar' bound ter have him! Whar's them 'ar guards? Ketch 'em, every mother's son of 'em, an' ef they don't show us ther prisoner we'll hang them! This hyer ain't no time fer foolishness. Whar ar' they?"

He rushed forth again, his men after him, all roaring like hungry wild beasts.

The guardsmen had mysteriously disappeared, and not a sign of them was to be seen anywhere. It puzzled the mob, and they realized that they were balked.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DENVER DETECTIVE'S NEW CLUES.

THE prisoner was not found, and for some time the mayor was not seen around.

Gradually the cheated mob cooled off, and once more Alfred Ashton had a respite. But, his life was in constant jeopardy.

In the mean time Don Danton had not forgotten what Tom Connor, proprietor of the Horse Hotel, had started to tell him regarding a certain Roxana Murray, and the excited words of the mayor.

As soon as opportunity offered, the Sapphire Sport sought further information in the same line.

He brought Connor and the mayor together under about the same circumstances as before.

"Now, Connor," he asked, "what is it about this Roxana Murray?"

"Thet's so," cried the mayor, "et slipped my mind in ther 'citement."

"I'll tell ye, Sport, much as I hate ter p'int s'picion her way," said Connor: "She was in love wi' Cook, an' a sort o' rival to Veronica Hilderbrant."

"And you hint that she may have killed Cook?"

"I don't hint at nothin', an' don't want to; I'm jest givin' you this hyer p'inter."

"What do you think about it, Mayor Barker?"

"I don't think she done et."

"Explain why."

"Wull, she's a tender sort o' gal, an' she seems ter take Cook's death ter heart. She ain't hardly been seen sence he was killed."

"Another trifling point which may fill a niche somewhere. Now, who and what is this Roxana Murray? I believe I will try and make her acquaintance."

"She's ther darter of Ben Murray, that was killed six months ago by fallin' down a shaft. Ther boys sot her up in a little store, an' she sells shirts an' socks, an' sech, and mends ther same fer ther boys as they

need it. Thar's her shingle, up ther gulch thar."

"Yes, I have seen it before, now that you remind me. Say nothing further about this, and I'll take a walk up there and see her."

The pair promised, and Don set forth.

Entering the shanty, he discovered a rather good looking young woman of twenty in charge.

She had a small stock of goods arrayed upon some rude shelves, while she herself was seated upon a low chair industriously plying her needle.

"Don't bother to rise, miss," the Sapphire Sport said quickly. "I don't want to buy anything; have merely dropped in to ask a question or two."

She eyed him in greatest surprise.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

"Let me explain who I am, first. I'm a fellow who has undertaken to find out who killed Kennedy Cook."

He watched her sharply.

She paled slightly, and quickly demanded:

"Then you think Alfred Ashton did not do it, as they want to prove?"

"That is just what I do think. What do you think about it?"

"I think the same, that he is innocent."

"Can you prove him so?"

"I wish I could."

"Then you, of course, do not know who did the deed."

"Do you suppose I would keep the secret, did I know? Not I, sir!"

"I have had a hint that you thought quite well of Cook, and that's why I came here."

"I won't deny it."

"You were something of a rival to Miss Hilderbrant, in fact; and, do you know, miss, there is just the breath of suspicion pointing your way?"

"Good Heavens! What can you mean?"

"Well, no one dares to breathe it aloud yet, but it is quietly hinted that maybe you killed him, seeing that you could not win him for yourself. Mind, I don't say so; I don't believe it."

The young woman was staring at him, wild and white.

"My God!" she gasped. "This is awful! Why should I kill the man I love? I think, had I been equal to such a deed at all, my rival would have been my victim instead."

"Unless you knew your love was utterly hopeless, and you would not see him possessed by another."

"Well, I did not do it, so there is no use speculating upon it."

"I am willing to believe you. I am determined to learn who did, however, and if you can help me any it is to your interest to do so."

"That I would do, gladly, if I could."

"I have done what I can to keep this suspicion against you from coming out for I would not want to see you accused, but nothing will place you in absolute safety but the fastening of the crime where it belongs."

"I am not greatly afraid, sir; people here know me too well to believe I could do such a thing."

"And so they ought to have known Ashton, from all the accounts of his character I have been able to get hold of. You did not go to the funeral, and you have scarcely been seen out of your house since the crime. All this might be made to tell against you."

"I could not go to the funeral; I knew I should break down, and I could not bear the thought of that in the presence of Veronica Hilderbrant."

"That is reasonable. Well, do not you let this suspicion be known."

"You may safely trust me for that, I think."

"I will go now. If you hear of anything you think will help me, do not fail to let me know—"

"Ha!"

"What is it?"

"Something I have never thought of till this minute."

"Respecting the murder? Let me hear it, by all means. I am gathering up all the fragments I can find."

"I hardly know whether I ought to tell you."

"And why?"

"I might cast suspicion on an innocent person by doing so."

"An innocent person has nothing to fear, generally. For your own sake, hold nothing back."

"Still—"

"You would want to see Kennedy Cook revenged—that is to say, the crime punished, I can well imagine. Then do not hesitate about telling me all you can."

"But, you will be careful before you accuse?"

"I'll not accuse till I am sure of my ground, rest assured of that."

"Then I'll make this matter known to you. Do you know the woman here in Yaller Jacket who is called the Gold Star?"

"I have seen her."

"Well, I know nothing about her whatever, for or against, but one evening I heard her and Mr. Cook having some hot words."

"Ha! this may mean something. Did you catch anything of what was said?"

"No, I was not near enough for that; but it has just come to me that maybe she was his enemy. Strange I did not think of it before, but my mind has been dazed since the murder."

"Well, make no mention of what has passed between us, and I will look into the matter," and Don took leave.

Now he had something more to think about in connection with the mystery, and still he was without a sure clue.

He had to pass the photograph car on his return to the hotel, and pausing to look at a frame of pictures recently taken, he caught sight of a person in the car whom he desired to see.

It was the Gold Star.

She was in conversation with Mlle. Nana, and was standing with her back toward the door.

Stopping by the steps, Don could not help overhearing what was being said, as neither was taking any pains to speak in low tone.

"I must be mistaken, of course," the Gold Star was saying, "but I felt sure I had seen you somewhere before. Since you think not, however, I must take it for granted that I was mistaken."

"Yes, I think you must be, unless, as I said, you have seen me in some other camp, for I have traveled a great deal."

"No, I have no recollection of you in connection with photographs."

"Then you are mistaken."

The talk seemed at an end, and Don sprung up the steps and entered the car, stopping short and lifting his hat the moment he was within.

"Your pardon, Mlle. Nana," he begged. "I will come at another time when you are not engaged. I merely wanted a type to present to the mayor. I'll drop in again at another time."

"No, stay, sir," urged the Gold Star, quickly. "I am going immediately."

"Hey in thar, gal!" a rough voice just then sung out. "Hyar we be, ther select six of Yaller Jacket, an' we want ter be taken, quick."

"That settles it for the present," said the Sapphire Sport. "Attend to them, Mlle. Nana, and I will call again. If you are going in the direction of the hotel, Miss Gold Star, we will walk together—with your permission."

"Yes, I'm going there, and I've no objection, sir."

They passed out, the detective giving Mlle. Nana a look which she seemed to understand and she at once gave her attention to the waiting group without.

CHAPTER X.

MCDAVIT PRODUCES PROOF.

THEY made a striking couple, the Sapphire Sport and the Gold Star, as they walked away together in the direction of the hotel.

And as they walked along, Delicate Don struck up a conversation.

"Have you been long at Yaller Jacket, Miss—Miss Gold Star?" he asked.

He cast a hint for her real name.

"Yes, call me that—simply Gold Star," she balked him. "No, I have not been a great while here, and yet it is several weeks, too, since I first arrived."

"Then you were here when that first mysterious death occurred?"

She flashed a quick look at him.

"Yes."

"There was something very strange about that affair, don't you think so? My curiosity has been fully awakened regarding it."

"Yes, it was strange indeed. I can hardly believe in the story about his being frightened to death. It does not seem possible that a man could grow so cowardly as to be afraid of the dark."

"And yet there is little room to doubt it here."

"That's so."

"And what do you think about the charge made against this young man Ashton?"

"I am afraid it is all right, and that you are on the wrong side in that affair. All the proof seems to be against him."

"Yes, seems to be against him; but, I believe him innocent for all that. He bears a good name here, and it is incredible that he would stoop to such a crime with nothing to gain."

"He had all to gain."

"How so?"

"Why, he loved Miss Hilderbrant, and—"

"And she loved him. She was free to refuse Cook after her father's death. Now if it had been Ashton who was killed, there would have been a much stronger reason for arresting Cook."

"I had not thought of it in that way."

"You see I have good ground for thinking him innocent."

"But, why are you so interested in the matter? What is it to you?"

"Well, first out of curiosity; and then I have been asked to take hold of it. I wish you could give me a clue."

"I wish I could."

"And can't you?"

"I? What do you suppose I know about it?"

"You knew Mr. Cook quite well, I have reason to believe, from what I hear."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"The same as I know others here," she said. "We played cards together, that is true, but that is right in my line, as I'll tell you."

"I would ask you a question, if you'd give a straight answer."

"You'll find I do that, generally."

"Well, answer this, then: What was the trouble between you and Cook on a certain evening not a great while ago?"

She demanded to know what evening, and Don was prepared to name the exact time and place, having obtained the data from Roxana Murray.

"I was not aware that any one knew about that," Gold Star observed. "I will tell you plainly, since you hint a suspicion in my direction. Mr. Cook had offered me insult, and I sharply resented it, that was all."

Delicate Don had no reason to doubt the statement, sincerely spoken as it was.

"If that is the case, there is no room for suspicion against you. You were friends with him after that, it seems."

"Yes, in the way of business. Insults are too common to be allowed to stand in the way of business, you must of course know. But, you did not suspect me?"

"Have no more grounds for suspecting you than for suspecting Miss Hilderbrant so far, Gold Star."

"Heavens! you do not suspect her, I hope?"

"Certainly not."

The young woman gave a sigh of relief, which Don could not fail to notice.

He had made mention of Miss Hilderbrant's name because he wanted to complicate the matter as much as possible in the minds of certain persons.

"I am glad you do not suspect her, sir, for that would be too bad."

"And yet, why not as well suspect her as Ashton?" Don asked. "She might have killed Cook to free herself, and to protect Ashton, whom she loves."

Gold Star looked at him, pale and startled.

"What thoughts you have!" she exclaimed. "I don't believe such a thing has occurred to the mind of another person here. You had better be careful how you speak out, sir."

"The innocent have nothing to fear."

"I don't know about that."

"Why don't you?"

"You claim Ashton is innocent, and yet he came near getting hanged."

"That was by a mob who did not know what they were doing. But, say, have you any idea why McDavit is so bitter against Ashton?"

"I suppose he is honest in believing him guilty."

They had reached the hotel, and were standing on the piazza to finish their chat.

"This enigma is a complicated one, truly," Don said musingly, as if talking only to himself. "The death of Hilderbrant, and the robbery; the finding of the papers from his safe in Cook's trunk; the murder of Cook, and the devotion of McDavit—"

"You say papers were found in Mr. Cook's trunk?" the woman broke in.

Don started, as if he had been caught speaking his private thoughts out aloud unwittingly.

"Yes, since it is out, that's so," he admitted. "Some of Mr. Hilderbrant's private papers were found in Cook's trunk, papers which had been taken from the robbed safe."

"And what else?"

"Some other letters and papers."

"Did they not throw some light upon the matter?"

"What matter?"

Don wanted to draw out every word he could, for he believed this woman knew more than she had yet told.

"Why, the murder, of course. The letters might have told whether he had any foe or not, or whether any one had threatened him for any reason. But, I suppose not, or you would have made use of it."

"I would not care to reveal what information I got in that way, for it would be hardly just to the dead man to parade his— Did you speak to me?"

It was Jabe McDavit who had interrupted.

"Yes, I spoke ter you. See hyer, what do ye think of this? Does et look now as ef Alf Ashton is innerecent?"

As he spoke he held up the glove, all stained with blood, and the long, slender dagger, which he had been parading.

"Where did you get those things?" Don demanded. "Whose glove is this?"

"Whose do ye s'pose, but Alf Ashton's? And ther dagger, too; this hyer is ther one he lost. He's ther murderer, sure as you ar' born!"

"But, where did you get them, I ask you?"

"Where but at ther mine whar he hid 'em after his ugly work was done. I hev been playin' ther detective, too, a leetle bit."

"Bring them along, and we'll find the mayor and go and see the prisoner at once. We'll see what he has to say about it, and you shall be there to hear."

"All right, I'm willin'."

Don excused himself to Gold Star, and they set forth.

The mayor was speedily found, and the discovery was explained to him, much to his amazement.

"Snakes an' Sadducees!" he gasped. "Who'd 'a' thunk et? Sapphire, et do begin ter look mighty doobyus fer ther prisoner, an' no mistake."

"We'll go and hear what he has to say about it," Don proposed.

They set forth, and were soon at the calaboose.

The prisoner was now there.

Ashton looked up in surprise, seeing who the trio were, and asked what was up, knowing the sport and McDavit were not friends.

"Et's all up, that's what's up," McDavit cried. "I mean et's all up wi' you! We have got ther clincher on ye now, young man, an' don't ye fergit et. We hev put et home this deal."

Don watched to see what effect this would have, and the mayor waited for Ashton to speak.

"I don't know what you are talking about," averred the prisoner.

He looked from one face to another.

Each seemed grim.

"Then I'll tell ye what I'm talkin' about," McDavit went on, eager to clinch the nail he thought he had driven. "Cast yer eyes onto these hyer things, an' then tell us ye ar' in-nercent ef ye dar'!"

"I dare tell the truth, and I dare assert my innocence in the face of anything you can hatch against me," was the fearless retort.

Nevertheless, Ashton was pale to the lips.

"Hatch ergainst ye— What do ye mean?"

"Just what I say. You have a purpose in seeing me hanged for this crime, if you can bring it about."

It was now McDavit's turn to show weakness.

"Yer—yer don't know what ye ar' talkin' about," he cried. "You ar' a liar, ef ye mean ter hint that I am tryin' ter put this thing on ye fer any other reason 'n that I believe ye done et!"

"Then why have you taken the pains to stain my glove and bring it here?"

At this the accuser laughed outright.

"Do you acknowledge this is your glove?" asked Don, now.

"Yes, sir, I do; it was at the mine, along with my overalls and jacket, and was free from blood the last time I saw it."

"And this is the dagger you said you had lost?"

"It is. I'll tell the truth, no matter what comes of it, for it is the truth you must work upon. I believe this man lies wholesale, and that he stained the glove himself. Where he discovered the dagger, I cannot imagine."

"I'll tell ye whar," McDavit roared. "I found et wrapped in the glove, an' both stuffed away in a crack of ther tunnel; that's whar!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE SAPPHIRE'S SUSPICION.

The prisoner looked McDavit in the eyes, unflinchingly.

Don Danton watched both; so also did the mayor, but less understandingly than did the Detective Prince from Denver.

After a moment of silence the prisoner retorted:

"I believe you lie, Jabe McDavit; but, if

you are telling the truth, I have not the slightest idea how these things came there."

"Was any one with you when you found them?" asked the Sapphire Sport.

"No; I was alone," the answer.

"The prisoner questions the truth of your statement, and it is unfortunate you did not have some one with you."

"Blazes! do you have proof fer every p'int you bring up? sence ye claim ter be a sort o' half-way detective?"

"I never bring forth an accusation I cannot back up with the proofs."

"Wull, what more proofs d'ye want 'n this hyer glove an' dagger? Ain't they their own proofs?"

"They must be taken as such, if you are willing to swear to the statement you have made regarding them."

"An' I am, you bet."

"The only thing for me to do, then, is t' offset the proof you have brought forth, for while you are working to prove this man guilty I am working to prove him innocent, since I do not believe him guilty."

"What! ye don't believe et yet?"

"I do not, for a certainty."

"Then et's 'cause ye won't. Any man wi' sense would have ter believe et, now. Et proves etself."

"You are welcome to your own opinion regarding my sense, only do not grow too personal in your remarks or there may be another trifling unpleasantness. The mayor and I will go with you and see the spot where you found these things."

The fellow started for the instant, but immediately said:

"All right; come right along an' I'll show ye. Ef ye think I'm lyin' I'll soon show ye I ain't."

The prisoner had cast a grateful look at Don, but now, as McDavit ceased, he turned upon him with a look suggestive of dread.

Telling Ashton to keep up courage, Don left the jail and the three set off for the Mink Mine, of which Ashton was superintendent, and in which McDavit was an employee—when he worked at all.

Arriving there, McDavit was allowed to take the lead.

He found a torch, and lighting it, conducted the others into the tunnel.

Without hesitation he went straight to a certain spot where a crack was seen; then he said:

"Thar, thar et is, an' mebbe now ye will believe me."

"Where were the glove and dagger?" asked Don, mildly.

"Why, right in thar, on course."

"I know; but the exact spot, I mean. They did not occupy the whole crack, from ground to roof, did they?"

"You're too blame' smart," McDavit growled. "Hyers whar they was, right in hyer, d'ye see? Right in hyer whar ther pinch is."

He held his torch close to the crack and pointed with his finger.

Don took the torch from him and looked in, to see for himself just what the formation of the crack was at that point.

True enough, it came closer together, further in, forming what McDavit had uniquely described as a "pinch," and it looked reasonable enough that the glove, with the dagger rolled in it, might have been held there.

"How came you to look in here?" Don inquired.

"I was lookin' everywhere, an' knowin' ther crack was hyer, I looked inter et same as any other place."

"That's reasonable; I can't find any fault with that; but, I do not see any stain of blood on the sides of the crack, my man. I don't see how the glove could have been put in there without besmearing the walls."

McDavit looked startled.

"Snakes an' Sadducees!" cried Mayor

Barker. "Is that so, Sport? Et couldn't 'a' been put in thar 'thout leavin' a stain, et couldn't!"

"Don't you be gittin' ahead so darn fast," roared McDavit. "Ef et was wrapped in a piece o' paper et couldn't stain anything, could et? That was how I found et, wrapped in paper."

"Then you made a mistake in not saving the paper! What kind was it?"

"A old newspaper, that's what."

"So much the greater your mistake, then. Newspapers are not greatly plentiful in a camp like this, and if you could have shown that it was one Ashton was accustomed to read, it would have been a telling point against him. Don't you see it would? You made a big mistake, there."

Don had a double purpose. He wanted to take the rascal's mind from the fact of the lack of blood-marks on the rock, and divert it to something else.

"That's so, by darn!" the fellow exclaimed. "I never thort of that. I throwed ther paper away, but mebbly I kin find et, ef et ain't got burnt up. I'll see, an' ef I kin I'll bring et out, you bet."

"Where did you throw it?"

"On the floor down in ther engine shanty."

"We'll go right there and look for it."

"That's what we wull, you bet."

McDavit seemed not only willing, but eager, and they retraced their way out of the tunnel and went to the shanty where the engine was working.

"Didn't see nothin' of a newspaper on ther floor hyer, did ye?" McDavit demanded of the man in charge.

"No, I didn't," the answer. "When did ye leave it here?"

"Early this mornin' 'fore you kem ter work. It was rumpled, an' thar was some blood on et."

"No, I didn't see et, Jabe."

"When did you make this discovery?" the detective now asked.

"Early this mornin', 'fore ther mine started up."

"Then it is strange you made no mention of it to me when I saw you in the Brace-up Saloon after the funeral."

The fellow looked disconcerted, but braved it out.

"I hadn't got ready ter tell ye what I knowed yet," he declared. "You was so smart I thought I'd give ye a little time ter swell out 'fore I took some of et out of ye."

"Who was here when you arrived this morning?"

"Nobody, that's who."

"How did you get in?"

"I have a key to ther shebang, that's ther way."

"Whose business was it to come here first in the morning, to open this shanty for the day?"

Don spoke to the engineer.

"My fireman's," the answer. "He's s'posed 'o be here at half-past five ter blow ther whistle and get things ready for business."

"Where is he now?"

"Takin' his snooze. He has leave ter do that, seein' he is out so early in the mornin'."

"Then you were here before half-past five, eh?" and Don turned again to McDavit.

"Sartin I was."

"That was pretty early, when you had at least one whole day to investigate in."

"That's my business."

"Certainly; I am not questioning your right in the matter at all. But, we must see this fireman. Will you call him up, sir?"

The engineer had simply to go around to the other side of the boiler and give something a poke with his foot, and that something resolved itself into a grimy, shock-headed personage.

"What yer want?" he growled.

"Did you find a newspaper on the floor here when you came this morning?"

It was Don who asked.

"Naw, I didn't," the sleepy reply, briefly given.

"Did you sweep out?" The floor had the appearance of having been cleaned up that morning.

"Yes, sir, I did," now more awake and seeing who the questioner was; "but I didn't see nothin' of no newspaper. Reckon I'd 'a' took a look at et ef I had found one."

"This one, however, was all crumpled, and had blood on it."

"Then et's sure I didn't see et."

That settled the point, and leaving McDavit there the mayor and Don went out together and returned to the hotel.

"What do you make of et all, anyhow?" the mayor asked.

"I have a strong suspicion against this fellow McDavit," Don answered. "His yarn has the appearance of thinness about it. It's too thin to stand much washing, that is sure."

"Yas, so I begin ter think. I believe you could twist him all up, ef ye wanted to. Et's a serious question whar he did git holt o' that dagger."

"And one which we must discover for him, too."

"Do ye think ye kin do et?"

"I can try."

"Well, that's more'n I kin say, fer I wouldn't know how ter begin. I'm all befuddled as et is. Ther funder we go ther wuss the mix seems ter git."

"It's a complicated case, that I'll admit, but I think it will begin to work out, now, as soon as we can get hold of the right end to begin with. And I think we'll get hold of that pretty soon."

"I hope so, an' I tell ye, sport, I'm glad you ar' hyer, fer as you kin see I ain't hardly a match fer McDavit, as I have ter own, though I do try ter bluff him off when he gits ter ragin'. Ef you wasn't hyer he might try ter 'cite ther crowd ter lynchin' again, an' he may do et anyhow, fer all I kin say. Ef he does, thar is goin' ter be a sarcus, you bet!"

CHAPTER XII.

PHOTOGRAPHING A GHOST.

As they drew near to the hotel Tom Connor shouted for them to hurry up.

Looking, they saw there was quite a crowd on the piazza, and wondered what was going on.

The next moment it was all plain, when they saw Mlle. Nana, with her men assistants, arranging her photograph instrument before the house.

"Come on, mayor; come on, Sport; you ar' jest ther boys I want hyer!" the proprietor of the hotel yelled. "I am goin' ter have my house took, an' I want ther pink of ther camp ter be in et."

"We'll be thar!" the mayor called back.

Men and women to quite a number were in the doorway, on the piazza, and on the steps, and among the women was the Gold Star.

Connor himself was arranging the group to suit his own ideas, and as Don and the mayor came up he called to Don to take his position toward the left while the mayor was given a place near the center.

"Thar, that's et," he, the proprietor, declared finally. "That's ther way I want ye, ef ye don't kiek out. You, mayor, bein' ther flower of ther flock, I hev put ye in ther front; an' you, Sapphire Sport, you ar' a good pardner fer Gold Star, fer this 'casion."

"Are you ready?" Mlle. Nana now called out.

"Ready and a-waiin'," Connor responded.

"All attention, then."

The lady photographer held up a finger to enjoin order, and seeing that it was perfect, uncovered the lens.

She remained motionless, then, a proper time, when she recovered the tube and signaled that it was all over, and most of the subjects drew a breath of relief.

Shouted one man, immediately:

"Let's see et, Milly Nanny, let's see et!"

By that name she was commonly called, the nearest the illiterate could come to it.

"Impossible, yet," the lady responded.

"In about an hour I will have some of the pictures ready for sale. If you will wait a few minutes, however, I'll see if the proof is good."

"All right, all right Hooray fer ther proof!"

She ran to her car and entered, and the crowd waited patiently for her to reappear.

Presently she came forth, bearing a proof of the picture in her hand, and as she approached the hotel piazza she said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry, but I shall have to take the picture over again, if you care to have me do so. This proof is spoiled. Some one moved just at the critical moment, it seems."

"Let's see et, anyhow," requested Connor.

She stepped forward and gave the picture into his hand, at the same time indicating the blemish.

Just behind the Gold Star, as she appeared in the picture, was a shadowy face, the face of a man, as if he had dodged behind her just as the plate was bared.

"Ther face of Ken Cook, b'mighty!" cried Connor, the moment his eyes fell upon it.

"What? What's that ye say?" demanded Mayor Barker, pushing forward, his interest fully awakened.

"I say et's Ken Cook's face," the amazed Connor repeated. "How in ther doose did et come thar, an' him dead an' buried? Et must 'a' been his ghost!"

The whole crowd pressed around, eager to see what it was, and the Sapphire Sport was among them. He was apparently as eager as any one else, and the picture presently came into his hands.

"It certainly is the face of the dead man," he remarked. "Can you explain it, Mlle. Nana?"

"It seems to defy explanation, if this man is dead," was the reply. "I did not see the person there when I was taking the picture."

"Some person was there, nevertheless," said the Sapphire Sport, "or the shadow would not be here. Suppose we ask the lady herself if she noticed any person standing near her."

"That's ther ticket!" the mayor agreed.

The Gold Star was still on the piazza, and Danton, the mayor, and others, approached her.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "The picture spoiled, do I understand?"

"Yes, spoiled," answered Don. "Who was standing close behind you when the picture was being taken? Do you remember?"

"I do not know, sir; I was not aware that any one was really very close behind me. Will you allow me to look at the picture? Too bad it is spoiled, but of course another can be taken— Oh!"

The exclamation was given with a scream and dropping the picture she reeled back and leaned against the house for support. Her face was pale as death, and her eyes were wildly dilated. Everybody was looking at her, and it was some moments before she could speak.

"Oh! why did you show me so horrible a thing?" she demanded.

"You asked to see it," answered Don, thoughtfully, "and I supposed you had more nerve than to be knocked out by it."

"I thought I had more nerve myself, but it seems I am only a woman, after all. It is the face of the dead man, about as he appeared after death, and the sight of it shocked me."

"But, it certainly can't be," Don assumed. "The dead man could not appear here to be photographed; that is out of the question."

"Then the plate must have been a damaged one. Had you taken a picture of the dead man, Mademoiselle Nana?"

"I had not," the answer.

"And are you sure the plate was all right?"

"Yes, I am sure it was. I will have to take the picture again."

She put out her hand for the proof, and upon receiving it tore it up and went to her car.

When she came out she had another plate in hand ready for the camera, and signaled that the groups upon the steps and piazza should rearrange themselves for a second picture.

This was soon done, and by the time the lady photographer was ready so were her subjects.

The Sapphire Sport stood apart from the Gold Star this time, and she stood at a distance from all the rest, though not out of range of the camera.

A moment of preparation, as before, and then Mlle. Nana removed the cover from the tube and the picture was taken, after which followed another wait while she repaired again to the car to make a proof.

When she came out disappointment could be read on her face.

"Missed fire ergain, b'mighty!" cried Connor. "Wonder what et is that's out o' kelter this time?"

The Gold Star was seen to compress her lips tightly, as if determined it should not shock her again, no matter what it was.

Mlle. Nana came up.

"Spoiled again," she announced.

"What is the fault this time?" asked Blue-light Bill.

"The same as before, only a little more so," smilingly. "The same face appears again."

Now the Gold Star paled, and it could be seen that her hands twitched nervously, in spite of the efforts she made to appear perfectly calm.

"You do not mean to say it is there again, do you?" she demanded.

"It certainly is," the lady photographer answered.

"Then there is some fault with your machine, that is all; the glasses you have used are not perfect, but have been spoiled."

"Then it is strange they are spoiled in no other way. Every other part of the picture is perfect, save this one shadowy face, and this time it is even more striking than before."

"In what way?" asked the Sapphire Sport.

"Look and see, sir."

"Don took it."

"This is more than strange," he said wonderingly. "I don't pretend to understand it; do you, mayor?"

He passed it on to Mayor Barker.

"Snakes an' Sadducees, no!" the mayor exclaimed. "Thar's more to et than is in sight, is my opine."

Don turned to the Gold Star.

"Do you care to see it again, Gold Star?" he asked.

She had nerved herself for it.

"Yes, certainly," she answered, extending her hand to take it. "I am prepared for it now. There was no one near me this time, of that I am certain, and so I claim there must be something wrong with the apparatus— Good heavens!"

As her eyes took in the picture that exclamation escaped her.

The shadowy, deathlike face was there again, but this time her own face was not there; the death-face appeared as her own—that is, it was upon her shoulders in the picture! It was, in fact, Kennedy Cook, in death, standing arrayed in the gorgeous garb of the girl sport!

A perspiration appeared upon her face, which she quickly wiped away with her hand, and dropping the proof she fled into the house.

"That's doosed queer, darn me ef et ain't," remarked Connor.

"You ar' right et ar'," echoed the mayor.

Everybody was eager to see the picture, and as it was of no use to Mlle. Nana she allowed it to go the rounds of the crowd.

The proprietor of the hotel proposed trying it yet again, which was done, and this time the result was a perfect picture, one of which he might well feel proud.

Don, after a talk with the mayor and Connor, went into the house and sent a request to the Gold Star asking an interview with her, which was granted, she joining him in the "parlor."

"What do you make out of this strange occurrence, lady?" Don asked.

"I know not what to make of it, sir," the answer. "It puzzles me utterly. I do not believe in the ghost theory, that's sure."

"Nor do I, for I do not believe in ghosts, and that is what makes it all the more mysterious. If we could only charge it to the account of some respectable ghost, that would explain it."

He said this in a jocular way.

"I consider it no joke," said the young woman, seriously. "If I thought it was a joke, purposely played upon me by that woman, I would call her to account for it in a hurry. But, tell me, what is your opinion of it? I realize there is danger in it for me, if I am not careful."

CHAPTER XIII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

DELICATE DON watched her a moment before replying.

She stood well his searching scrutiny, and he proceeded leisurely to respond to her question.

"I think I understand your meaning," he said. "You would say, if the people at large get the idea that you are haunted, they may make it lively for you on the charge that you killed Cook."

"That is it exactly. It would be a pretty rough charge, but there would be room for it in the minds of the superstitious. They would be wrong, nevertheless, for I did not kill him—why should I? I left him alive and well in the Brace-up Saloon that night."

"You think I am questioning your innocence?"

"I know you are trying to solve the mystery of the case, and that is what has brought you here."

"Well, admitting that, Gold Star, you need have no fear of my laying the charge at your door, upon evidence so shadowy as this. When I make a charge I'll back it with solid proofs."

"Then I have nothing to fear from you."

"And little to fear anyhow, if what Jabe McDavit has discovered can be made to serve its purpose."

She inquired, and Don told her what he meant, giving her the particulars about the finding the dagger and the blood stained glove in the mine.

They had talked for quite a little time, when Don gave a start and looked beyond the Gold Star, or where she was sitting, and she turned her head quickly to see what he was looking at.

Don rose and backed toward the door, as if in haste to get out of the room, his manner slightly nervous and he still staring beyond the woman.

"What is it?" she demanded, springing up. "What do you see, sir?"

"Nothing, nothing, madam," Don answered. "You will excuse me if I leave you abruptly. You'll pardon my haste—"

She whipped out a revolver and pointed it straight at him.

"I'll not excuse you, just yet, sir," she cried. "Stop where you are and answer my question. What was it you saw when you looked past me just then? You cannot tell me you saw nothing."

"Can't you see it yourself?" Don asked.

He pointed, and she turned and looked again.

"No, I can see nothing unusual," she declared, and turned again to him.

Don had now covered her with a revolver, and her vantage was lost, as she was quick to realize.

"Put up your weapon, Gold Star," he smilingly directed. "It is useless now, as you see. That is right; and now pray take my word that it was nothing I saw, for so I tell you truly."

"You are lying to me," she cried, hotly. "It was that shadow you saw, now wasn't it?"

"It was not, madam. I beg to be excused, now. Perhaps we may have another interview at no distant time— Ha! what is all this about?"

A great shouting was heard, and opening the door—having his hand already on the knob, Don slipped out to the piazza, the woman following him to see what was going on.

In front of the hotel was a drunken horde, headed by McDavit, and they had a man in their midst who seemed to be a prisoner. At first the Denver detective thought it was Ashton, but he soon saw his error.

The man was Dowbey, the justice.

"Hooray fer Judge Lynch!" shouted one fellow, and the crowd took up the cry.

"We'll see whether or not ther people of this byer camp kin have jestice done!" roared McDavit. "We ar' goin' ter set up a court an' give ther prisoner a fair an' square try. Mayor, we demand ther prisoner!"

Some boxes had been hastily piled up in pyramid style, and the frightened justice was boosted up on the top of the pile.

"Trot him out!" McDavit roared. "Ef we can't have him now we'll level ther jail to ther ground! D'ye hear?"

The mayor was there, and he looked eagerly to find Blue-light Bill.

"What am I ter do, Sport?" he asked, running up.

"Let me deal with him," Don answered.

"I wish you ould would."

Don had had a brief talk with his men, and they understood what his intention was and were ready to do their part.

The Sapphire Sport pushed to the front, where he faced McDavit, and suddenly he leaped upon him like a tiger, his left hand clutching his throat while his right thrust a revolver in his face.

"Don't move," Don ordered, "or you are a dead man! Let no one attempt to interfere, or I will make it hot for him. Jabe McDavit, and not Alfred Ashton, killed Kennedy Cook!"

The face of the prisoner turned deadly white, while the crowd became silent in an instant.

"It's a lie, a lie!" McDavit gasped.

"It is the truth, and I am going to prove it," Don insisted.

"But, ye ar' goin' ter give me a fair show, ain't ye? I tell ye I didn't do et, pard."

"We ought to hang you up at once, as you intended doing with Ashton," was the indignant response. "We'll give you a chance, however. Men of Yaller Jacket, shall we give him a fair trial?"

"Yes, yes; a fair trial," shouted Don's own backers.

And seeing it was their own ringleader who was in trouble, McDavit's gang had to take up the same cry.

"Good for you!" Don congratulated. "The spirit of fairness isn't dead yet, I find. Fair play all around, as fair for McDavit as for

Ashton. We mustn't do any hanging until we are sure of our man."

"Three cheers!" shouted Billy McNulty, following instructions.

The cheers were given with a will, and the purpose of the mob had been balked in the neatest possible manner.

"I am proud of you, one and all, men of Yaller Jacket," the Sapphire Sport declared. "You have acquitted yourselves like men. No one can blame you for wanting to avenge the crime, but it's a great deal better to go slow and sure, you know. Now, it's a question whether it was McDavit or Ashton. McDavit claims it was Ashton—"

"And so et was, too!"

"While I claim it was McDavit," Don continued, not noticing the interruption. "I only remains to be seen which is right. The proofs against Ashton are strong, but I am sure you will be glad you did not hang him when you come to see the thing to the end. I shall now lock McDavit up and put him under guard, the same as Ashton. The guardsmen can be made up half and half; that is to say, half Ashton's friends, half McDavit's; and that is as fair as any one can ask, on either side."

"An' three cheers more fer ther Sapphire Sport," Billy McNulty proposed further.

These, too, were sent searching for the welkin.

All the time McDavit was talking away, denouncing, and vociferating by turns, but all to no purpose.

The guardsmen were chosen, care being taken to select men of genuine grit for Ashton's half, and when this had been done the prisoner was taken to the rough calaboose, where both were secured.

"And now I think I'll search you, my friend," said Don to McDavit.

"By what right do ye do et?" that tough demanded, a look of alarm coming into his face. "I thort I was 'cused of murder—fool that ye ar! I didn't know ye set me down fer a thief besides."

"I purpose taking the right, whether it is mine or not," answered Don. "It is just possible that you have something about you that will be of interest to us in the solving of this mystery. You may be a thief, for all I know about you; I am inclined to think you are."

"If I had my hands loose I'd—"

"You'd do nothing, for you are not big enough in your boots when I am around. Now, sir, hold still—Whoa!"

The prisoner gave a savage kick at the Sapphire Sport, which barely missed.

"Only the fact that you are bound and helpless saves you from a good punching, I can tell you, for that," Don said, grimly. "Don't you try it again, or patience will have ceased to be a virtue with me."

"Don't you search me then, that's all."

"I've told you what I intend doing; you may as well submit tamely as oblige me to use force."

"Which I won't; an' you—"

"All right; we'll see. Mayor, and you, Connor, just hold him while I go into his pockets and boots."

There was no use of further objection, for the man was helpless, and the Denver detective proceeded to make the search as promised; and it was not without reward.

This reward was not obtained until he came down to the fellow's boots, where in one of them, at the back and under the leg of his trousers, was discovered the packet of papers which had before been found in the trunk belonging to Kennedy Cook! The papers had been partly opened, to pack neatly in this novel hiding-place.

"I had an idea I should find something," Don observed, lightly. "Am greatly obliged to you, Mr. McDavit, for the care you have taken of these for their owner; I'm sure he will reward you."

"You ber darn!" was the growled retort. "Ef you ain't a blamed fool you will reap rich, now, fer them 'ar papers is worth ther price of ther Speckled Hen, an' more."

CHAPTER XIV.

DON DANTON'S DEAL.

DON and the mayor returned from the calaboose, a few moments later, and after instructing the guardsmen, repaired to the hotel.

"That was neat done, that was," the mayor complimented, as soon as they were where they could speak in confidence. "That done ther mob in a way they didn't look fur."

"There is little danger of any further trouble of that kind," Don made response. "McDavit's friends won't want to lynch him, and they can't in justice, even mob justice, think of lynching Ashton and letting him go free when both are under the same charge."

"Besides, you showed Jabe up as a thief."

"True enough. Everything is all right for the time being, and it only remains to fasten the crime where it belongs."

"Why didn't ye make Jabe tell what he knows about these hyer papers?"

"I thought I'd wait until I had examined the papers first; and it may be they will throw a good deal of light on the matter."

"Yes, that's so, too."

Delicate Don at once retired to his room, closed and locked the door, and proceeded to examine the papers which had come into his hands.

He had not proceeded far when a low whistle escaped his lips, and an expression of keenest interest appeared on his face. Being alone, he could relax himself and allow his emotions full expression.

When finally he rose from the table it was to pace the floor, his face just a little pale.

"I do not wonder Thomas Hilderbrant was a haunted man," he said to himself. "It is almost enough to convert me into believing that ghosts and apparitions really do exist. But, it can be understood better as the hallucination of a guilty mind. Now, what am I to do in the matter?"

He was puzzled, and his face showed it.

"These children of the Haunted Man ought not to know this secret," he mused. "And yet, what right have I to withhold it from them? Their father intended they should know, though it were far better he had never penned his confession. I have read about dread secrets and the like, and have had to do with not a few of them in my time, but this is the worst that has ever come under my notice."

Finally he wrapped the paper up, put the packet in his pocket, and left the room and the house.

He went to the photographic car of Mlle. Nana.

She happened to be disengaged, and he sat for a picture, but while this was being taken a conversation in low tones was rapidly carried on.

It was barely ended when the Gold Star entered.

"Ah! I hoped I might find you alone, Mademoiselle Nana," she said, pleasantly. "I see you are vain enough to sit for pictures, Mr. Sapphire."

"Yes, if you want to look at it in that way, Gold Star. I have had some requests for mine, and I thought I'd oblige my friends. Did you come with the same object in view?"

"Yes, I confess I did."

"Well, the lady is about through with me, so you are just in time."

Mlle. Nana was done with him, in fact, and now gave all her attention to her new customer.

"What style of picture do you desire, lady?" she inquired.

"The very best you can produce, and a dozen of them," was the response. "You may place me to suit yourself, if you mean that."

"All right; I will do so."

The car was not a cheap affair in its furnishings, but was well equipped with the best, and there was a wide variety of settings to select from.

The lady photographer set to work, and in a few moments had arranged a background, when she invited the Gold Star to take her position in a certain manner for the sitting.

Everything being ready, the picture was about to be taken when Danton, who had taken up his position in a corner of the car behind the camera, was seen by the sitter to start and gaze beyond her, as he had done at the hotel.

Her eyes turned to him with a look of alarm, and just at that moment the plate was exposed to the light.

In a brief time it was over, and the picture secured.

The Gold Star rose from the chair she had occupied, her face slightly pale, and strode straight to the Sapphire Sport.

"I want to talk with you a moment, sir," she said.

"Very well, I can oblige you," Don answered politely. "Shall we step outside?"

"Yes, if you please; or, no, no matter, since Mademoiselle Nana is going into her dark-room. I will wait to see the proof, Mademoiselle Nana."

"Please do so, and I will take another if it is not satisfactory."

The lady photographer disappeared into the little closet set apart in one corner of the car, and the Gold Star turned to Don.

"What did you see?" she asked.

"Nothing," Don answered.

"I know better, sir; you would not start as you did unless you had."

"No, I tell you the truth, lady; I saw nothing," Don insisted; and he told only the truth, as the reader will understand.

"Then why did you start?"

"I am not ready to explain."

"You are lying to me, sir, and I know it."

"Since you are of the weaker sex I must put up with what you say, I suppose."

"My sex has nothing to do with it; I say you have lied to me, and I am going to catch you in it. You are smart, but not smarter than everybody else in the world, as you may find."

"I have never set up such a claim, madam."

Don knew what was coming; he had understood the game from the first, and now what the Gold Star said only confirmed his thoughts.

"It's so, whether you ever did or not," in something of anger. "I saw you come here, and I came for this very purpose of sitting for a picture in your presence and—"

"Suppose I had not remained?"

"I would have asked you to do so, and you would not have refused so simple a request. I was determined to know if you saw that shadow behind me which has twice appeared in photographs, and this was the only way I could find out, since you would not tell me. The picture will tell me the truth."

"Very clever," Don quietly observed.

At that moment the lady photographer came out of her tiny room.

"A shall have to break this plate and try again, madam," she said, raising her hand as if to dash the plate into a box of waste materials.

"Stay!" the Gold Star cried. "Let me see it. What is the matter with it?"

"It has the same defect as the others, madam," was the explanation. "It is something more than strange."

The Gold Star stepped forward and took the plate, looking at it intently, her face

becoming cold, drawn and pale as she did so.

The same shadowy form was there again! Standing behind her as she sat in the chair, appeared the death form of Kennedy Cook, the outlines not bold and strong, as those of her own picture, but vague and shadowy yet plainly visible!

The woman turned upon the Sapphire Sport.

"Tell me now you saw nothing," she cried. "The light reveals it; what I could not see myself, this photograph shows me. Madam," turning again to Mlle. Nana, "I will not sit again; you may finish one dozen pictures from this plate, and have them done as soon as you can."

"But, madam, the negative is spoiled—"

"No matter; pray do as I request. If I am willing to take them, that is nothing to you."

"Very well," and the lady photographer said no more.

"Are you going to the hotel, Sir Sapphire?" the Gold Star then asked of Don, as she turned to go.

"Yes, I am going in that direction," was the response.

"You may walk with me, if you please."

"You have something to say to me?"

"Yes, I have, sir."

"The two left the car together, and bent their steps in the direction of the hotel, walking slowly.

"I know you did not want to tell what it was you saw," the Gold Star remarked, "and I forgive you for the falsehood you told me. Now I have the proof, and there is no need for you to deny longer."

Don did not make further denial.

"There is something I want you to know, sir, and if you will call upon me in my room in about two hours or so I will tell you. Will you come?"

"If you desire it."

"I do."

"Then I will be there."

"It must be plain to you that I am a haunted woman."

"You have heard me say, madam, that I do not believe in ghosts. I believe this can be explained in some other way."

"Nonsense! I am haunted. I tell you, just as much as Thomas Hilderbrant was haunted. You might take this as proof that it was I who killed Mr. Cook, but I swear to you it was not."

"One could not help connecting the one matter with the other, Gold Star, and I'm only human."

"Well, take my word for it that I did not kill him—take my oath if you cannot trust my word! Come to my room in two hours, and I will tell you a story that will explain much."

"There are some things that need a little explanation, madam. I have guessed a good deal already. You are Rose Cook, the wife of Kennedy Cook—Your surprise is proof enough. You have been searching for him ever since he deserted you, taking your little son with him—There, do not show excitement here; I will call on you in two hours, when we will talk it all over quietly."

They were at the steps of the hotel-piazza now, and Don lifted his hat and passed on in the direction of the Hilderbrant cottage.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HAUNTED MAN'S HISTORY.

Don had not proceeded far when he heard some one coming behind him.

Stopping to learn who it was, he saw it was Lyster Hilderbrant, and paused for him to come up.

"You are going to the house?" Lyster asked.

"Yes; wanted to see you and your sister together, sir."

"I saw you set out in this direction, and thought that might be your errand. What have you discovered?"

"I have recovered the lost papers; found them in the possession of Jabe McDavit, whom we have arrested and locked up, as perhaps you have heard."

"Yes; I was working quietly to defeat his intention respecting Ashton. I was offering twenty dollars to every man who would defend the prisoner, and I guess we would have made it lively."

"That was a good idea."

"But, about the papers; have you examined them?"

"I have taken that liberty, sir. We will not speak further of them until we have your sister with us."

Lyster looked at Don in surprise, but said nothing further on the point until they had reached and entered the house, and were seated in the sitting-room, Veronica with them.

"Miss Hilderbrant," Don then spoke, "I have recovered the stolen papers, as I have told your brother, and I did not care to speak further concerning them till I could see you both together."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I have taken the liberty to read these documents, having practically the right to do so, and now I want to tell you candidly and earnestly that you had far better allow me to burn them and you remain forever ignorant of your father's dread secret."

"Impossible," spoke Lyster, immediately.

"Positively impossible," his sister supported. "We are more than ever eager to know the truth."

"But, I warn you, it will be at the cost of your peace and happiness for life, it may be. This secret is known only to me, now that Cook is dead, for I am told that McDavit cannot read."

"No, no, we must have the truth," Lyster urged.

"And yet it is something you are better off not to know, sir. Will you not take my word in the matter and let me save you this—this life-long sorrow?"

"We positively cannot," declared Veronica, fairly trembling with excitement. "If father left a written confession for us, it is our right to have it in our possession, and have it we must."

"He was weak to make the confession at all. Far better had he carried the whole burden with him to the grave."

"But, he did not," argued Lyster, "and we must know what it was."

"Very well; you demand what is your right to demand, and I can say nothing more. I have warned you, as a friend, however, and you would not heed me. When you have read the confession you will have reason to regret it."

The brother and sister were both deathly pale.

They looked at each other, and the lips of each were tightly compressed.

Their resolves were written upon their faces, and Don Danton had nothing to do but to yield to their command.

"We will read the confession," said Lyster, huskily.

"Here it is, then," and Don extended the paper toward him. "Do not read it until I have taken my leave."

"You believe no one but you knows this secret, sir?"

"So I believe."

"And you will keep it?"

"You may rely upon me for that; it will remain with us three forever, unless let out by you."

"That is all we ask. Whatever the confession, it is our right to know it, and if it must bring sorrow, as you say, so be it: we can bear it as well as our father bore it."

"I am not sure of that— But, we need

say no more about it. It is yours to read, when I have gone."

"Have you discovered who it was robbed father's safe?" inquired Veronica.

"It was undoubtedly Jabe McDavit, doing the work for Kennedy Cook. Cook had an object in view in getting hold of these papers."

"And what was that?"

"He seems to have had your father already in his power, and by getting hold of this secret in addition to some other hold he had upon him, he could have wrung out his life blood."

"And for that reason papa was forcing me to marry him!"

"Undoubtedly; it seems to prove itself."

"But, what would McDavit have done with the documents?" asked Lyster.

"He knew what importance Cook attached to them, and meant to take the same advantage as soon as he learned the secret. He told me it would be worth the Speckled Hen Mine."

"The knave! And was it for this he killed Cook?"

"This was a part of the reason, and it might have led him to do the deed, but I think he had another strong incentive besides. But, of this more anon. I will now take my leave, so as to give you opportunity to examine the papers I have placed in your hands."

"It seems like turning you out, Mr. Danton."

"It was my own request, you remember, that you should not read them till I had gone away. I will call again later."

Don set forth upon his return to the hotel, the brother and sister going back into the sitting-room the moment he had gone and carefully closing the door.

During the ensuing minute neither spoke, but they stood and looked in each other's face.

"Shall we read, or shall we not?" Lyster finally asked.

"I intend to do so, whether you do or not," was the firm, quiet response.

"Then we will both read, for it would be unwise for one to learn the secret and the other not."

Lyster advanced to the table where the papers had been left, and taking up the packet proceeded to open it with trembling fingers.

It was soon done, and the document proved to be a will, some deeds, a confession of a valuable papers, and lastly, a letter which was marked as the confidential one to his children.

This paper Lyster opened, and it was his sister's turn to read it upon the table.

Their faces were pale, and in silence, and anxious.

For a moment they remained silent, then of a sudden Lyster raised his hand to his forehead, exclaiming:

"My God!"

And simultaneously Veronica gave vent to a scream and turned away from the table.

Lyster, too, turned away, and had taken his advice!

"Would to God we ever yield to our curiosity!"

he moaned. "We have seen the father's sins, and we are accursed for doing so."

"It is fate," said Veronica. "The sins of the father are visited upon the children, you could not escape."

"Must be visited upon us as this, not such as this; know—"

"But not such as this. It was only our curiosity that led us to this."

"There is no help for it now. I would have destroyed it if I had known."

"Yes, I perhaps, but you would have spared yourself and carried the secret for-ward."

"I am not sure of that— But, we need

ever, as

"I won't deny it; I intend reading to the end, now."

"As do I, too."

Calmer, now, they approached the table again, and again started to read, but only a little way further had they gone when both turned away, weeping aloud in the anguish of their hearts.

Better far, it would seem, had they taken the advice of Don Danton.

"This is more than I can bear, more than I can bear," sobbed Veronica. "Oh! that I were dead!"

"It was cruel of father to make this confession to us," moaned Lyster. "Far better had he carried it with him into the grave. Now we can understand his life, my sister."

"Yes, now we can understand indeed."

They waited until they felt able to read further, talking the while, and after a time read the document through to the end.

Both gave a sigh of relief when the end was reached.

"He was forced to confess, it seems," spoke Lyster. "The spirit of our dead mother gave him no rest."

"It was she who haunted him, it was she who appeared to him in shadowy form in the dark, and it was owing to this he would never be alone a moment without a light. I almost pity him."

"Pity! He deserves the— But he was our father."

They bowed their heads.

What they had discovered can be told in few words, briefly, where to quote the document at length would be to overrun our allotted space.

A year after the birth of his second child, Thomas Hilderbrant had reason to believe his wife false to him, and the proof he had of it seemed positive. There was no room for doubt.

Almost insane, he murdered her, in such a way that discovery was impossible, and her death was ascribed to a natural cause. Within a very short time after this, he came to discover that his wife had been as innocent as a child unborn of the stain he had laid upon her.

Had he accused her, or had he taken her to task when he suspected otherwise, she could have cleared herself easily. He had not done so, but had killed her slyly and without a word of reproach. The guilty one had been another, whom his wife was trying to shield, believing her innocent of any wrong, and her very innocence made her an easy victim.

When this discovery was made, Thomas Hilderbrant went almost wild. He was for a time all but insane. He would have confessed, he declared in his confession at last, but his love for his children, and his desire to stand between them and the hard world, made him face the hell's fire of life. He came to be haunted; whenever for a moment alone in the dark his murdered wife would appear to him, pointing at him with accusing finger.

Such was the story in brief; no need to dwell upon it at length. Whether he was really haunted, or whether it was only the hallucination of a guilty mind, let the reader decide.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHERE THE CRIME BELONGED.

When Don Danton touched the hotel he lingered around, talking with the mayor and the landlord, until the time was at hand for him to call upon the Gold Star.

Being known to the landlord, then, his appointment, he sent up to ask if the lady was ready to receive him, concluding his talk with the mayor while he awaited the answer which was slow in coming.

When the fellow came back, who had been sent to the Gold Star's room, he announced that no one was in the room.

"That is strange," Don immediately observed. "Did you try the door?"

"Yes, an' it is fast, sir."

"Connor, this must be seen to at once," Don cried. "I have reason to fear she may have killed herself."

The proprietor and the mayor were alarmed in a moment, and all three started up to the room to learn just what was the matter, and whether Don's suspicion was correct or not.

Don himself forced the door immediately, and there on the bed lay the Gold Star, dead.

"I feared it," Don said sadly. "I thought it possible she might do it, but I did not think she would carry it out until after her interview with me."

He told the mayor and Connor his suspicions, then.

"You ar' right, fer a thousand dollars!" the mayor cried. "That is jest ther hull thing in a ketttridge-shell, an' I'm bettin' on et."

"Ha! here is something in writing," exclaimed Don, who had advanced to the bed. "Here is a letter in her left hand, as you see. This is no doubt the story she had to tell me, and this is the way she meant to tell it. We'll see what it is."

He removed the missive from the hand that was not yet cold, and in the presence of the others opened and read it.

"I have guessed aright," he presently spoke. "It is a brief sketch of her life, a confession of her guilt, and a general statement of her connection with this whole mystery."

"Read it, read it!"

"Yes, I will do so. She has escaped punishment in this way, for it would have been my duty to arrest her and hand her over to the officers of the law for her crime—"

"Your duty?"

"Yes, so I said."

"An' who ar' you, then?"

"I am Don Danton, of Denver, my friends."

The surprise can better be imagined than described.

As soon as possible, Don read the confession aloud, and the mayor and the landlord listened to it with keen interest.

This was shorter than the confession of Thomas Hilderbrant, but for the same reason it cannot be quoted, nor is it necessary, since a brief explanation is all that is needed.

The woman's name was Rose Cook—rather that had been her maiden name. Her married name was Robeyson, that being the rightful name of him who had been known at Yaller Jacket as Kennedy Cook. Both she and her husband were natives of Maine, where they had married.

In one respect this confession was like that of Thomas Hilderbrant, but in one only, and in even that one it was unlike. After the birth of their child, how long was not stated, Robeyson suspected his wife of unfaithfulness, and though she stoutly protested innocence he deserted her, taking their child with him, and that was the last seen of him until she found him at Yaller Jacket.

Now in her confession she admitted the justness of her husband's suspicion, but though guilty she was jealous of him and could not bear the thought of his taking another wife to fill her place, and so followed him for the one purpose of revenge. Somehow she looked at the situation as if her own offense was atoned for, while his became magnified until it appeared as a mountain in her mind's eye.

For stealing her child she could not forgive him. Coming to this camp of Yaller Jacket, she found the truant, and found also that he was about to wed another woman regardless of the fact that he had no divorce from the first. That he really was a rascal has been shown. On the night before the crime, or a night or two previous, she faced him and revealed her identity, but he refused

to condone her offense, though willing to use her well in spite of the past, if she would not make a further reference to it.

She then and there resolved to slay him. Not that she intended doing it herself if she could help it, but she would hire another. She looked around, and fixed upon McDavit as the tool she wanted. She had been there long enough to know her man, and was aware that McDavit was secretly Cook's foe. She hired him, and McDavit did the deed, using a weapon that would cast the suspicion upon Ashton. She said finally that Ashton was as innocent as Roxana Murray, who might possibly be suspected of some share in the crime, while Jabe McDavit alone was the real murderer, besides herself. It was to clear himself and hush the matter up that McDavit had been so eager to have Ashton suffer for the crime; and he had an old grudge against Ashton anyhow.

There was more in detail, but enough for our purpose.

Armed with this, Don, the mayor, Connor, McNulty and others, went to the jail, where it was sprung upon McDavit in a way that surprised him.

Finding that everything was known, the fellow broke down and confessed, and made clear all the points that yet remained unsettled. Don Danton's work upon the case had been perfect, as the proofs showed.

Alfred Ashton was freed, and though it was intended that McDavit should have a fair hearing, the enraged denizens of the camp took the matter into their own hands, and in less than an hour Jabe McDavit was swinging lifeless from a tree, riddled with bullets.

The same mob he had led before had turned against him, and Danton and the others, seeing that interference would be useless, and not deeming the prisoner in this instance worth the risk of honest blood in his behalf, took the wiser course and remained out of it. It would have been a doubtful venture, in any event, laying the risks aside.

When the camp came to know who the Sapphire Sport was, the people went wild with enthusiasm. They could not do enough in honor to their distinguished guest.

The whole matter was talked over from beginning to end, wherever two or three denizens met, and gradually Don's fine work was realized.

Questions were asked concerning the Haunted Man, of course, but the people were candidly told that while that secret had been solved, it was a family matter purely and would never be divulged.

The brother and sister had burned the confession their father had left to them, and the secret could never become public. If it was ever told to any one, that one was Alfred Ashton; and if so, it made no difference to him, for in due time he and Veronica were happily married.

Billy McNulty, too, found for himself a life-partner in the person of gentle Roxana Murray. While to them was intrusted the care of the child of the Robeysons, they being willing to take it. The child was found through McDavit's confession, he having been Cook's agent in placing it. The camp of Yaller Jacket still flourishes, but it has now a new name. Don Danton is an occasional visitor there, with "Mlle. Nana," who was no other than his wife; and they are always made welcome.

THE END.

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